

THE BAMBOO CROSS: TOWARD A VIETNAMESE THEOLOGY  
AND CHRISTIAN EDUCATIONAL MINISTRY  
IN VIETNAM

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

by  
Dung Thien Le  
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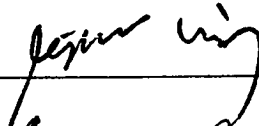
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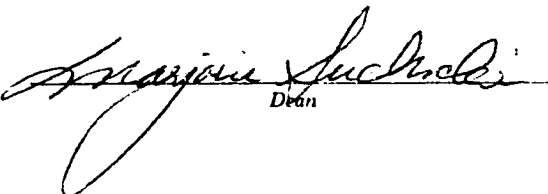
**DOCTOR OF MINISTRY**

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## ABSTRACT

### The Bamboo Cross: Toward a Vietnamese Theology and Christian Educational Ministry in Vietnam

by

Dung Thien Le

The Vietnamese Protestant Church, in carrying out its mission, has been engaged for a long time in a struggle between Western and traditional cultures. This project raises the issues of incarnation of the Gospel and the transformation of culture as a quest for a Vietnamese theology.

On the way toward a Vietnamese theology in general and a theology of Christian education in Vietnam in particular, this study discusses the dynamic relation between the Gospel and culture which is metaphorized by the bamboo cross. From this point, it is suggested that inculturation of the Gospel and transformation of the culture are the fundamental concepts for a theology of culture. This discussion reveals how elements of the Vietnamese cultural heritage (such as traditions, customs, legends, folk tales, folk songs, stories, lullabies, festivities, beliefs, and religious concepts) can further an understanding of the Christian faith, and how these cultural aspects can be used as resources for theology. At the same time, negative aspects of the culture still exist within the Church and society, and need to be overcome and transformed to become

appropriate to the authentic message of the Gospel.

With the intention to discuss a Vietnamese theology from which is drawn an application to Christian educational ministry, this project offers an approach to theology which takes seriously its contextualization, its integration with the culture, and its task of transformation of the culture. Engagement and dialogue is considered as methodology for a Vietnamese theology in general and Christian education in Vietnam in particular.

Finally, this project proposes a model of continuity and change as a dynamic relation for application in the Church, entailed by some practical suggestions, in the hope that the Gospel becomes really relevant and meaningful to Vietnamese people in their cultural context.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

#### Problem Addressed by the Project

This project deals with the problem of the relationship between Christianity and the Vietnamese culture. This relationship has two tensions within it. On the one hand, cultural characteristics as the patterns of life of the people are of utmost significance, but for a long time their values have been underestimated, even condemned by the Church. They have been seen as obstacles to be overcome instead of being used as bridges in communicating the Christian message. On the other hand, in this changing world, theology and Christian educational ministry as "fashioning people" are to be viewed from a holistic and global perspective. Yet this is still strange to the Vietnamese Church which is influenced by culture. The Christian message and life has been conforming to the old traditions instead of transforming them in light of the Gospel. Theology and Christian education in Vietnam have suffered both through transmitting a conformist tradition and through resisting interrelatedness within the culture.

Of course, a theology as well as Christian educational ministry are not easily changed, especially for those who



consider that the Gospel is something to be separated from culture. Likewise, cultural characteristics are not easily changed, especially for the Vietnamese who have fought for many centuries to keep stability and identity. However, it is easier to change both a tradition and a theology and educational ministry when people become aware of why the change is necessary. Therefore, this project takes inculturation of the Gospel and transformation of culture into account as a quest for a Vietnamese theology and Christian educational ministry in Vietnam.

#### Importance of the Problem

When the missionaries brought the Gospel to Vietnam, they also brought Western forms of culture. As a result, there have been problems arising from the clash of cultures. From the beginning, the Vietnamese Protestant Church in carrying out its mission has been engaged in a struggle between western and traditional cultures.

It is important for the Church to understand the Vietnamese cultural characteristics in order to be able to integrate the Gospel into the hearts of the people and bring it home by understanding and respecting all the aspects of the Vietnamese cultural life. It is also important to translate the Gospel into culture by using the cultural characteristics to communicate the Gospel to the people in their context. Developing a greater understanding and appreciation of one's national character is always an

important point that opens people up to a greater avenue in their spiritual and theological journey.

On the other hand, in this changing world, the Gospel message cannot be conformed too indulgently to any existing culture. Vietnamese culture is still patriarchal, sexist, and hierarchal. In such a culture, it is necessary to promote a Christian educational ministry involving all aspects of life--which is still strange to the Vietnamese culture.

Even though many useful writings on theology and culture in general have been published, there are no significant resources for the Church in Vietnam dealing with its mission as viewed in relation to the Vietnamese culture. This project searches for an approach to theology and Christian education, based on cultural understandings; accordingly, the Church can share the Gospel to the Vietnamese and help them grow in faith more holistically. The Church leaders, especially educators, need to evaluate their perspectives and find new approaches to Christian education in this cultural context to make the Gospel effective in doing educational ministry.

#### Thesis

My thesis is two-fold. First, the cultural characteristics of the Vietnamese people need to be understood, respected, and utilized as a means to communicate the Gospel in their context. Second, the

Vietnamese Church, influenced by culture, needs to seek a new approach to its theology and educational ministry from a holistic and global perspective, which is oriented to the whole person and the whole world.

### Definitions of Major Terms

#### Bamboo Cross

Bamboo is a plant germane to the Vietnamese culture because it grows everywhere in the country. In Vietnam, every village is surrounded by a green hedge of bamboo which forms a rampart and gives much shade out of the sun. Bamboo is very familiar and useful to the Vietnamese. In the country, houses are mostly made of bamboo. People also use bamboo to make furniture, farming tools, and other utensils such as chopsticks, hand fans, etc. From ancient times, bamboo has been a symbol for Vietnam, the cross has been a symbol for Christianity. Here, the bamboo cross stands for the dynamic relation between the Gospel and the Vietnamese culture.

#### Christian Education

Christian education in the Vietnamese Church has traditionally been considered to be the transmission of knowledge and information about the Bible, church history, and the heritage of Christianity. In this project, Christian education is used in a broader sense. Christian education includes all of the ways and activities which help people come to know God more fully, fashioning people to

become more Christ-like and more fully human; accordingly, people may find who and where they are, and what they have to do in relation to God, the community of faith, and the world.

Christian education enables people to be sensitive to relating Christian teaching to life, to be involved in mission, and to use their gifts to serve the Church and the world. As such, Christian education is more than the transmission of the Christian message; it is also the endeavor of stimulating people to respond to a Christian ideal of service through their Christian lives.

### Culture

According to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz,

Culture denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men [people] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.<sup>1</sup>

Here the term is used in a general sense as the total product of human creativity that constitutes the life and history of a particular people. Culture is a set of symbolic systems, including patterns of thinking, beliefs, habits, customs, linguistic expressions, styles of communication, aesthetic sensibilities, ethical standards, and behavioral norms which regulate the ways of life of a people.

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

### Custom

Custom denotes general practices or patterns of behavior of a society which have been transmitted from generation to generation and have become habitual to the people.

### Inculturation

Inculturation is the process of learning the values, concepts, expectations, and standards of a particular society whereby individuals learn to live in accordance with their culture. The inculturation of the Gospel means the process of incarnating the Gospel into a particular culture. By this process, the Gospel is to be understood, interpreted, and applied in a particular cultural context; accordingly the Christian message and life become embodied in a society.

### Transformation

In this context, transformation is the process of redirecting and changing the culture and people. This process is possible because culture and the people who live in it interact with each other.

### Vietnamese

For the purpose of this project, the term designates those people who live in Vietnam and share the same particular and distinct culture of the people, including the various ethnic groups.

### Work Previously Done in the Field

The relationship between Christianity and culture is an issue that many scholars have discussed. In his book Christ and Culture, Richard Niebuhr points out five viewpoints concerning the relationship between Christianity and culture: Christ against culture (Leo Tolstoy); the Christ of culture (Gnostic); Christ above culture (Thomas Aquinas); Christ and culture in paradox (Martin Luther); and Christ transforming culture (Augustine, Calvin). Dealing with the issue of the relation between "the world" and the "Kingdom" as revealed by Christ, Niebuhr in his book maintains that each of these views contains some truth but none of them contains the whole truth.<sup>2</sup>

Paul Tillich, in his important essay, "On the Idea of a Theology of Culture," discusses the relation between theology of culture and theology of the Church. He points out three possible attitudes toward culture. The first attitude is that of stereotypical catholicism which opposes "the world" to the "Kingdom of God," so a theology of culture is impossible.<sup>3</sup> The second attitude is "the old protestant one, in which church, cultus, and ethics are set free, their relativity recognized, but the cognitive

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<sup>2</sup> See H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> See Paul Tillich, "On the Idea of a Theology of Culture," in Visionary Science, ed. Victor Nuovo (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 36.

obligation, absolute science as supernatural revelation, remains binding."<sup>4</sup> The third attitude which Tillich endorses is the one which, on the one hand, involves "working out a precise distinction between religious potentiality and actuality, between religious principle and religious culture ...."<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, this attitude conceives

its religious principle not only abstractly, leaving its concrete realization to any and every mode of cultural development, rather it will seek to maintain the continuity of its concrete religious standpoint.<sup>6</sup>

In 1981, a seminar on interculturalism was sponsored by the Jesuits and was held in Jerusalem on the theme, "The Nature and the Demands of Inculturation, as Seen in the Light of Holy Scripture and of the Cultural Developments of Today."<sup>7</sup> According to Pedro Arrupe, "it is significant that the Seminar takes place in Jerusalem, where at the very beginning of her history the Church faced up to the question of what is the proper expression of the Christian Faith in daily life and activity."<sup>8</sup> More than twenty papers were discussed in the seminar and have been published under the

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<sup>4</sup> Tillich, "On the Idea of a Theology of Culture," 36.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>7</sup> See Marcello de Carvalho Azevedo, Inculturation and the Challenges of Modernity (Rome: Centre "Cultures and Religions," Pontifical Gregorian University, 1982), ix.

<sup>8</sup> Azevedo, xii.

series "Inculturation: Working Papers on Living Faith and Cultures" by the Centre "Cultures and Religions" of Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome.

In fact, many scholars have discussed the subject and a great amount of material has been published in the past several years. However, no significant work has been done which deals specifically with the relation between the Gospel and the Vietnamese culture, even though a great deal has been spoken and written about this people. By integrating available resources, this project proposes a theology of Christian educational ministry in the Vietnamese cultural context. The writer hopes that this project, as an initial study, can offer a humble contribution in paving a foundation for further research on the subject.

#### Scope and Limitation of the Project

This project focuses on the relation between the Gospel and the Vietnamese culture. This means that the project will not cover the sociological, economic, and political aspects of the Vietnamese, except for the case wherein these aspects impact the cultural character. The main application of this project is Christian educational ministry, therefore the project will not primarily discuss other ministries of the Church in any way beyond the educational dimensions.

In terms of the application of this project for the Church, an approach to Christian education and some proposed practical methods are presented. The application will be



limited to the Christian educational ministry and for the Protestant church at large in Vietnam.

### Procedure for Integration

In this project, a theology of culture will be presented and integrated with Christian education to create a theology of Christian educational ministry suitable to the Vietnamese context. To do this, the writer critically evaluates the cultural characteristics of the Vietnamese, including their philosophy, way of life, and religious background. An integrating and transforming approach to Christian education is discussed from a holistic, inclusive, and global perspective. Being aware of the necessity of understanding and appreciating some positive cultural characteristics of the people, the writer encourages the Church, on the one hand, to utilize the characteristics as bridges to communicate the Christian message and to integrate the Christian life with the culture; while, on the other hand, encouraging the Vietnamese to transform the traditions which are obstacles still surrounding and embodying the Church. Finally, the project points out ways in which the insights presented may be useful for the Church in Vietnam.

This project combines library research and theological reflection with practical suggestions. Being concerned with exploring new ways for doing Christian educational ministry specifically in the Vietnamese cultural context, as well as

the work on theology of culture as mentioned above, this project is based on work written either in English or Vietnamese.

Inspired by the works of Christian educators (such as Thomas Groome's Christian Religious Education; Maria Harris' Fashion Me a People; and Mary Elizabeth Moore's Education for Continuity and Change), which give insights for Christian education in general, the writer develops a theological foundation for Christian educational ministry in the Vietnamese context.

Additionally, the experiences of the writer, who was born and grew up in the Vietnamese culture and served the Church for several years, will be helpful in discussing the issue addressed.

#### Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 states the problem addressed by the project, its importance, and thesis. The major terms are defined, work previously done in the field is briefly mentioned, and the scope and limitation and the procedure for integration of the project determined. The purpose of this chapter is to raise the issue and set the stage for the chapters to follow.

Chapter 2 discusses the relationship between Christianity and culture and points out the possibility of a theology of culture which implies the conceptions of inculturation of the Gospel and transformation of the

culture from a Vietnamese perspective. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a biblical and theological foundation for an understanding of the dynamic relation between the Gospel and the culture surrounding and embodying the Church in Vietnam.

In Chapter 3, the national character and cultural characteristics of Vietnam--including its religious background, philosophy, spirituality, and way of life--are described. Its distinct cultural characteristics, such as rural culture, rice culture, especially its folk culture and arts, are highlighted and theologically considered. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an understanding of the Vietnamese culture according to which a theology of Christian education suitable to this context can be developed.

After briefly describing the whole ecology of education in Vietnam, Chapter 4 offers an approach to Christian education in the Vietnamese cultural context from a holistic, inclusive, and global perspective. An approach to Christian education is suggested which takes seriously its contextualization in the culture, its integration with the culture, and its task of transformation of the culture. This approach involves both engagement and dialogue.

Being aware of the dynamic interaction between the Gospel--including the Christian message and Christian life--and the culture, Chapter 5 also points out ways that the

insights presented can be applied and be useful to the local church by giving some examples and practical suggestions.

The summary and conclusion are given in Chapter 6.

## CHAPTER 2

### Theology of Culture: A Vietnamese Perspective

#### Theology and Culture

According to Richard Niebuhr, culture is the total process of human activity. It is an artificial secondary environment imposed on nature, including language, habits, beliefs, customs, ideas, social organization, social heritage. Culture is also all human achievement, the work of human minds and hands including speech, education, myth, science, tradition, art, philosophy, and government.<sup>1</sup> As such, culture can be understood as all kinds of expression of human experience, including customs, tradition, language, religion, beliefs, symbols, etc.

The term culture can be understood on two levels, the practical and the symbolical levels. The practical level bears on tangible realities, including the activities and way of conduct of social life, customs, and forms of institutions. The symbolical aspect indicates all that transmits meanings (be they conscious or unconscious) and representations between the members or the generations of a

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<sup>1</sup> See Niebuhr, 29-39.

society including rites, traditions, myths, languages.<sup>2</sup> However the term culture may be understood, we can agree with William E. Biernatzki that "Culture should not be thought of as a systematically or rationally structured pattern of components which interact in a perfectly functional way."<sup>3</sup> In fact, culture belongs to humanity who are dynamic themselves.

Human beings are always religious. In an ultimate sense, religion denotes philosophical and theological depths of human existence. At this point, Paul Tillich contends that religion is the substance of culture and culture is the form of religion.<sup>4</sup> For Paul Tillich, religion as ultimate concern is the meaning-giving substance of culture. Culture is the form of religion. It is expressions such as prayer, music, liturgy, art, dance, values, architecture, aesthetic forms, languages, hymns, sermons, sacraments, and scriptures. As such, the task of Christian theology is to interpret Christian symbols for the Church which is part of

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<sup>2</sup> Ary A. Roest Crollius, What Is So New About Inculturation? (Rome: Centre "Cultures and Religions," Pontifical Gregorian University, 1984), 35.

<sup>3</sup> William E. Biernatzki, "Symbol and Root Paradigm: The Locus of Effective Inculturation," in Effective Inculturation and Ethnic Identity, eds. Maria De La Cruz Aymes et al. (Rome: Centre "Cultures and Religions," Pontifical Gregorian University, 1987), 61.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Tillich, Theology of Culture, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 42.

the culture.<sup>5</sup> As such, Tillich's theology is primarily concerned with the relation between Christianity and the Western culture.

Niebuhr is also concerned about the relation between the Gospel and culture to which the Gospel belongs. He finds that there are five main viewpoints concerning the relation between Christ and culture: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ as Transformer of culture. For the first model, Christ is in opposition to the "world," to human achievement therefore "come out from among them [the world]." Culture is evil and we must not conform to it. The second model considers Jesus Christ as a great hero of human culture. He is a great teacher. Christ and culture are in agreement. Christ represents the perfection to humans to follow. The third, as synthesis model, emphasizes the divinity of Christ. Christ is one with God but also part of culture. Culture is both holy and sinful, therefore Christ is both continuous and discontinuous with culture. Culture is still subject to conversion. The fourth, a dualist model, contends that human culture is corrupted through and through and there is a conflict between God and humankind. The Christian is a citizen of two worlds which conflict with one another. Justification lies beyond history and Christ is seen as the judge of culture. The fifth, as a

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<sup>5</sup> See Tillich, Theology of Culture, 53-67.

conversionist model, contends that human nature is fallen or perverted. Christ transforms all things by lifting all things up to Christ's self. Conversion is necessary in all realms of human culture. For Niebuhr, all these positions are relative. Each type is a product of culture itself. All types are symbolic of God. Therefore, as Niebuhr says, each contains truth but none can be the whole truth. Niebuhr distinguishes between Christ and Christianity and seeks the image of Christ in relation to the culture. He contends that the "founder of the Church is the same Christ who gives the new law; the teacher of truths about God is the same Christ who is in himself the revelation of the truths."<sup>6</sup> However "there are many other views of what it means to 'believe in Jesus Christ'"<sup>7</sup> At this point, we can agree with Niebuhr that the image of Christ may differ from culture to culture, from people to people. As such it becomes relevant for them in a particular context.

Niebuhr also said, "There always remain the original portraits which with all later pictures may be compared and by which all caricatures may be corrected."<sup>8</sup> The portraits of Jesus Christ are the representatives, the images, and the descriptions which involve interpretations of who Christ is in relation to God and culture. They are our perspectives

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<sup>6</sup> Niebuhr, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Niebuhr, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Niebuhr, 13.



about Christ. Perspectives which depend on our cultural locations influence our understandings of Christ's personality. In the Gospels, John portrays Jesus Christ as Logos, but Mark portrays him as the person who walks from city to city, village to village. Each is not completely true, therefore we require a variety of portraits of Christ. We need each other to challenge and correct one another. Niebuhr says,

If we cannot say anything adequately, we can say some things inadequately. If we cannot point to the heart of essence of this Christ, we can at least point to some of the phenomena in which his essence appears. Though every description is an interpretation, it can be an interpretation of the objective reality. Jesus Christ who is the Christian's authority can be described, though every description falls short of completeness and must fail to satisfy other who have encountered him.<sup>9</sup>

Because in the pluralistic world there is a variety of portraits, there is a multiplicity of values associated with portraits. Christ plays a variety of roles but it is the same Christ. There always remain the original portraits which are not constructed by human hands. According to Niebuhr, "Jesus Christ and God the Father, the Gospel, the Church, and eternal life may find places in the cultural complex, but only as elements in the great pluralism."<sup>10</sup> In short, Niebuhr affirms the relativity of culture and the absoluteness of divine reality. The relation between God

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<sup>9</sup> Niebuhr, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Niebuhr, 39.

and culture is still the subject-object relation. In other words, there is still a distance between God and humanity.

Henry James Young with his process thought contends that theology of culture begins with the conviction that God participates in human culture.<sup>11</sup> Human beings in their existential situation are the locus of encounter between an individual and the transcendent, therefore theology should begin with human beings. From this standpoint, theology views and understands God in relation to human beings as concrete reality. Stephen Kim writes,

It is a time in history to view God neither as an abstract idea nor as a set of theories, but as a reality actualizing itself in a concrete diverse reality, particularly in persons and among persons whose dignity is the final and ultimate basis of an authentic community. It is a time to create, and recreate a new community in which the Lordship of the Just and Compassionate God is celebrated by all members justly and compassionately together.<sup>12</sup>

Culture is a reality that we cannot deny or destroy but accept and transform. To be a person means to live in a particular historical situation, to live in a certain locality. No one should underestimate, ignore, or reject distinct characteristics of their own community. To be

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<sup>11</sup> See Henry James Young, Hope in Process (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 31-45.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen S. Kim, "A Humane Theology of Community: The Asian-American Struggle for Authentic Living," School of Theology at Claremont, paper in process. Revision of "From I-Hermeneutics to WE-Hermeneutics: A Prolegomenon to Theology of Community from an Asian American Perspective" in Uncover the Myth, ed. Justo L. Gonzaler. Proceedings of the United Methodist Roundtable of Ethnic Minority Theologians, 1988, 44.

human beings is to live within a culture. In other words, persons cannot be fully human if they separate themselves from the culture in which they were born and have grown up. It was God who disclosed God's self in the Bible through the hearer's own culture. The Bible writers made critical use of whatever cultural material which was available to them for the expression of their message. In other words, Scripture is culturally conditioned, speaking to a people. In general, Wilson Wallis affirms this position.

Each cult is to some degree a creature of its own time and place, it uses the language of its social milieu, and embodies some current concepts and values. But each cult is also a product of other times and places, that is, a product of history itself, from which it inherits concepts and values of whose origins and meaning it is not entirely aware.<sup>13</sup>

It is necessary to discover how the culture of a people influences their faith and their lives. In some sense, by saying "I have become all things for all men [people] so that by all possible means I might save some,"<sup>14</sup> Paul implies that the more we become like the one we are trying to reach, the better the opportunity for a clearer communication. James I. Packer is right to say that in cross-cultural Christian communication, the right course will be neither to impose on folks of other cultures forms of Christian expression belonging to our own, nor to deny

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<sup>13</sup> Wilson D. Wallis, Culture Patterns in Christianity (Lawrence, Kan.: Coronado Press, 1964), 160.

<sup>14</sup> 1 Cor. 9: 22. All biblical citations are from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

them access to our theological, liturgical, ethical and devotional heritage. In this way, we invite people of different cultures, Christian and non-Christian alike, into a critical dialogue and thus we can avoid cultural imperialism while we engage in a particular culture.<sup>15</sup>

Religion cannot, and ought not to, be kept separate from culture. Bruce J. Nicholls argues,

Culture is never neutral because the outward forms of culture are always dependent upon the world view and values of culture. This is why it is always difficult to separate religion from national culture.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, as John Cobb said, "The study of cultures and religious Ways other than Christianity is a theological imperative for Christians."<sup>17</sup>

Theology is affected as God either loves this world universally, or God seeks to save people from this evil world. Paul M. Nagano contends that God's attitude towards our world is summed up in the final verse of Genesis 1, "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very

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<sup>15</sup> See James I. Packer, "The Gospel: Its Content and Communication - A Theological Perspective," in Gospel and Culture, eds. John Stott and Robert Coote (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979), 141.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce J. Nicholls, "Hermeneutics, Theology, and Culture with Special Reference to Hindu Culture," in The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts, eds. Bong Rin Ro and Ruth Eshenaur (Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1984), 259-60.

<sup>17</sup> John Cobb, Jr., "Buddhism and Christianity as Complementary," in Christianity and the Religions of the East: Models for a Dynamic Relationship, ed. Richard W. Rousseau (Scranton, Pa: Ridge Row Press, 1982), 53.

good." Nagano believes that our creator God has blessed creation, and that God is continuing to bless it. Human beings are to be responsible caretakers of the world, continuing God's redemptive work in being a blessing to the world.<sup>18</sup>

### Inculturation of the Gospel

Pedro Arrupe defines the term inculturation as follows:

Inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs, and unifies the culture, transforming and remarking it so as to bring about "a new creation."<sup>19</sup>

This working definition points out that inculturation bears with it a creative force. By incarnating Christian life in the culture and using cultural elements of the people to express the Christian message, Christian experience becomes a force which "creates a new unity and communion, not only within the culture in question but also as an enrichment of the Church universal."<sup>20</sup>

In the process of inculturation, it is necessary to take cultural, anthropological, sociological, and ethnological considerations into account.

The purpose of inculturation is not to salvage a

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<sup>18</sup> Paul M. Nagano, "How Do You Look at Your World," Morikawa Vision [Newsletter], Autumn 1993, 1-2.

<sup>19</sup> Cited by Peter Schineller, A Handbook on Inculturation (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 6.

<sup>20</sup> Roest Crollius, 16.

traditional culture but rather to render presenting the galloping process of change which affects all cultures the light and the life of the Gospel, so that each culture may become a worthy "habitat" of God's pilgrim people - a tent rather than a fortress- and an irradiating light that adds to the splendor of the entire cosmos.<sup>21</sup>

Inculturation is an attitude and method necessary for any ministry. As Schineller argues, it is the ongoing way of engaging in Christian life and mission. He says, "Wherever the Gospel is lived, wherever it is preached, we have the obligation to such continually for ways in which that good news can be more deeply lived, celebrated, and shared."<sup>22</sup>

Inculturation is exemplified by the incarnating life of Jesus Christ. Eventually, Jesus Christ became incarnated in one particular time and place. Rudolf Bultmann reminds us that "Jesus, a Jew of the Jews, used in his teaching and preaching maxims and imagery of the Jews, even when criticizing certain Jewish practices."<sup>23</sup> Certainly, Jesus Christ is to be considered the model of inculturation.

Just as Christ became like us so that we could partake of who he is; so the Gospel must become inculturated so that people (within their culture) can partake of it. The incarnation of Christ occurred so that the world would come

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<sup>21</sup> Roest Crolius, 54.

<sup>22</sup> Schineller, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 23.

to understand what the Gospel means and then appreciate and accept it. The context of the Gospel is the world which God so loved that he gave His only Son (John 3:16). Incarnation as Christ's identification with humanity implies that the culture in which the people live must be understood, and appreciated, and used as a medium for the revelation of the Gospel. Jesus Christ among the people--within their culture, sharing their hopes and suffering--makes the Gospel relevant to the poor, the oppressed, the outcast, and the handicapped.

If Jesus Christ has been incarnated in a particular culture, so are we. Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (John 20:21). This implies the incarnation for all of us. If Jesus Christ "emptied himself" and "humbled himself" (Phil. 2:5), his disciples who have the mind of Christ should have a profound respect for the people they serve, and for their culture.

Clearly, as Wallis observed, the New Testament is filled with the characteristics of Hellenic, Roman, and Iranian cultures; and then, as Christianity spread, it has been shaped and influenced by the cultures through which it has passed. It adopted concepts and practices from other religions with which it came into contact. Christianity has responded to a variety of social influences and its history is one of constant change and adaptation from century to

century, and region to region.<sup>24</sup>

### From Inculturation to Contextualization

Contextualization of theology is the process of letting theology speak in and through the historical and cultural context. Contextualization calls for awareness of the context in which the Gospel is incarnated. Shoki Coe in his article shows how the emphasis shifted from "indigenization" to "contextualization." The former tends to be past-oriented because it stresses the relation of the Gospel to traditional cultures. Contextualization, however, is future-oriented in that it is concerned also with the gospel in relation to social change and the historical situation.<sup>25</sup>

Contextual theology affirms that theology is basically interrelated with the context. It is seeking to make the Word become "flesh" in a given culture. In traditional theology, theological norms have been considered unlimited by time or space. It can be applied in the same way to different places. But contextual theology is aware of the cultural, social, political, and historical factors encountered within the context. By taking into account the peculiarities of a particular people, contextualization is the process of making the gospel relevant to a particular

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<sup>24</sup> Wallis, 1-3.

<sup>25</sup> See Shoki Coe, "Contextualization as the Way Toward Reform," in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Themes, ed. Douglas J. Elwood (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 49-54.



context. In other words, theological reflection has to do with the people so that they can understand how to incarnate the Gospel in their particular contexts. In this sense, Aloysius Pieris declared that there can no longer be a non-liberational theology; theology is valid only if it originates, develops, and culminates in the process and praxis of liberation. He insists that "inculturation and liberation, rightly understood, are two names for the same process."<sup>26</sup>

In the process of contextualization, the matter is not only to interpret the situation but also to raise prophetic voices which lead to social change. At this point, Schineller writes,

The shape and the form of liberation may vary, in light of the differing faces of injustice and deprivation, but the church in any culture can no longer be blind or deaf to the call for authentic, integral liberation. Inculturation of Gospel values in each and every situation inescapably involves the imperative of liberation.<sup>27</sup>

### Transformation of the Culture

According to George R. Saunders, despite holding its constant features, Christianity is never a fixed, isolated, or neatly bounded system as it is transmitted from people to people or as it evolves within a particular context. Christianity needs to take on different forms and to have

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<sup>26</sup> Aloysius Pieris, An Asian Theology of Liberation (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 111.

<sup>27</sup> Schineller, 109.

different functions and meanings in different settings. In other words, Christianity is always open to modification and transformation. On the other hand, as Saunders argues, "it is not only concerned with the transformation of Christianity, but also with cases in which Christianity is the agent for change in other systems." As such, Christianity and culture interact in a dialectical process that leads to transformation of both.<sup>28</sup> At this point, Kosuke Koyama, in his article "Christ's Homelessness," reminds us of Shoki Coe's affirmation that the gospel must be culturally contextualized, yet it must "gospelize" the cultural context itself. The incarnation is the ultimate event of contextualization. Koyama says that these were the key points in Coe's understanding of Christ and culture.<sup>29</sup>

In short, on the one hand, the Christian message must find its roots in human cultures; on the other hand, with its authenticity, it must play a part in transforming culture. In fact, all cultures have their negative side. Integrated with the culture, the Gospel must be the agent for change. Netto has well pointed out:

The theological process can be a potent force, as it has been in the history of several societies, in the re-shaping cultures and personalities to the end that we may indeed respond appropriately and creatively to

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<sup>28</sup> George R. Saunders, ed., introduction to Culture and Christianity: The Dialectics of Transformation (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 2.

<sup>29</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "Christ's Homelessness," Christian Century 110 (1993): 702.

the coming of the kin-dom ("kin" dominion) of God.<sup>30</sup>

### A Vietnamese Perspective

If theology is to be concerned about people in their encounters of life, it must be contextual. Contextual theology for the Vietnamese is a theology that is rooted in the concrete situation of Vietnam. It is a theology taking the people's cultural heritage and historical context as starting points in doing theology.

Bruce J. Nicholls points out two approaches to the task of formulating a theology of Gospel and culture, that is, existential contextualization and dogmatic contextualization. The first approach begin with culture. It seeks to develop interaction between the subjective question of man in history and an existential understanding of the Word of God. The second approach reflects a concern for biblical theology as a fixed and authoritative orientation point. It, too, seeks to translate and communicate the biblical message to each particular culture, but unlike existential contextualization, it transcends the boundaries of particular cultural conceptual forms and practices and starts with a dogmatic framework rather than a cultural one.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Benoni Silva Netto, "Emerging New Approach to Doing Theology," Morikawa Vision [Newsletter], Autumn 1993, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Bruce J. Nicholls, "Towards a Theology of Gospel and Culture," in Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture, eds. Robert T. Coote and John Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 50.

The Vietnamese do not have to adopt a Western life-style, culture, or way of thinking in order to become Christians. They can be Christians and yet still be Vietnamese and enjoy their heritage. The Vietnamese church should not be the product of a foreign culture, but ought to identify with Vietnamese culture. Leander E. Keck was right when he said,

Every cultural imperialism in the name of the Messiah (every attempt to make Western men out of Asian converts) is a betrayal of the hope for the Messianic Age and an idolization of one's own culture. If the Church does not transcend every cultural situation, it will confuse itself with the Kingdom of God.<sup>32</sup>

Eventually, in the Western culture, the Gospel is distorted by accommodation to Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy. The Christian theology stemming from a dualistic idea of the world develops the attitude that this world is essentially either good or evil, as such one can become either optimistic or pessimistic regarding the world. Moreover, as Saunders said, "When Christianity is taken out of the European cultural tradition, then, the nature of kinship, lineage connections, and the role of ancestors often become problematic."<sup>33</sup>

In Vietnam and other Asian countries, contextualization must include making the Gospel understood in the context of

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<sup>32</sup> Leander E. Keck, Mandate to Witness: Studies in the Book of Acts (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1964), 101.

<sup>33</sup> Saunders, "Transformations of Christianity: Some General Observations," in Cultural and Christianity, 181.

these countries rather than in the context of Western countries. In other words, it is necessary to make a cultural transposition from the Western context to the Vietnamese context.<sup>34</sup> The purpose of such cultural transposition is to make the Gospel contemporary and relevant to the context. It is important to note that, sometimes, Vietnamese cultural heritage can help us understand God and the Gospel message more easily and more fully for the Vietnamese. For instance, the conception of eternal life is reflected in the Vietnamese tradition of ancestor worship. Appealing to intuition becomes necessary for an understanding of theological issues such as life after death or eternity. The riches of the Eastern traditions might contribute in shaping a broader model for theology. Therefore, an Asian theology can result from the dialectic interplay between the Asian culture and the Bible. By drawing a contrast between Eastern and Western thinking, Jung Young Lee contends that the Western mind operates according to "Either-Or" categories, whereas the Eastern mind uses the categories of "Both-And." He insists that for the Yin-Yang way of thinking has no problem thinking that God is both transcendent and immanent at the same time. God cannot be either transcendent or immanent. The God of

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<sup>34</sup> C. S. Song proposed a transitional theology for Asian peoples. See Song, The Compassionate God (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1982), xii-xiii, 95-96.

transcendence is also the God of immanence.<sup>35</sup>

Certainly, one encounters the divine through intuitional experiences much more than through logical understandings. Vietnamese culture can provide ways of grasping a Christian faith which comes from God's revelation. The Christian truths should be translated into the context of Vietnamese wisdom, for in fact the Christian faith is not Western, but universal. It is important to rediscover the Vietnamese cultural heritage and consider Vietnamese ways to find our own authentic theological voice.

Effective communication of the Gospel to the Asian people is dependent on the effective use of the religious vocabulary with which they are familiar, and the cultural pattern of life in which they find self-expression and community being. The dominant philosophical and religious concepts of the people must be made into the instruments of interpreting the Gospel.<sup>36</sup>

Stephen Kim criticizes missionaries for judging Asian peoples according to Western standards and values, and disregarding the dignity of Asian cultural, ethical, and religious identity. Their proclamation was based on their own spirituality rather than the need of the Asian people. Therefore, Asian theology is a humane struggle to recover

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<sup>35</sup> Jung Young Lee, "The Yin-Yang Way of Thinking," in Christianity and the Religions of the East, ed. Richard W. Rousseau (Scranton, Pa.: Ridge Row Press, 1982), 10.

<sup>36</sup> Alan S. Wong, "Indigenization: Liberation of the Chinese American Churches," in The Theologies of Asian Americans and Pacific Peoples: A Reader, comp. Roy Sano (Berkeley: Asian Center for Theology and Strategies, Pacific School of Religion, 1976), 102.

authentic humanity from distortions and oppression. This viewpoint emphasizes God as the restorer, healer, and liberator of distorted, wounded, and oppressed humanity.<sup>37</sup>

Theology cannot eliminate the traditional affirmations of people and neglect the social dimension of religion. While recognizing the Bible as our essential source of theology, we cannot isolate our Biblical understandings from the life situation in which we find ourselves. The Christian message is never an abstract truth. We cannot do theology without taking the context into consideration. The significance of contextual theology is that it takes seriously the historical and cultural contexts in which one lives and works. The task of Asian theology is the redefinition and re-explanation of the Christian message in the context of Asia. It is the duty of Christians in Asia to rediscover their own religious and cultural roots, and struggle for cultural identity in the midst of a legacy of colonialism and cultural imperialism. If doing theology is to be present within a real situation, we cannot isolate the search for theology from the search for self-identity. As such, the Asian spirituality shaped by Asian cultures and religions needs to be taken into account in forming a Christian spirituality. On this point, C. S. Song mentioned the intersection of Asian spirituality with Christian spirituality.

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<sup>37</sup> Kim, "A Humane Theology of Community," 46.

It is no longer simply a question of evangelizing the so-called non-Christians.... It is important here for us to ask: from the Christian view point, how can Christian spirituality and Asian spirituality intersect in such a way that people begin to see the historical meaning of their existence in a new light? <sup>38</sup>

When doing theology in Vietnam, Vietnamese folktales, mythology, symbols, images, stories, and historical facts should be used as authentic resources which are powerful in illumining and interpreting the Christian faith. The Gospel must become relevant and bring hope to a people of war, oppression, suffering, and poverty like Vietnam. It is necessary to search for a Vietnamese Christian theology relating to their concrete situation. The simple reason is that if the Christian message is to be understood in the points of view of different times and backgrounds, there must be a Vietnamese theology. Vietnam is a land of several religions of which Christians make up only a small percentage of the total population. Having suffered from a colonial experience and cultural imperialism, the Vietnamese want to achieve authentic self-identity. Vietnamese theology will be a response to their struggles for full humanity. In this sense, Vietnamese theology will be liberational. In an Asian setting, it is necessary to make theological meaning out of the roots of Asian situations.

A truly liberating theology must ultimately be the work of the Asian poor, who are struggling for full humanity.... Doing theology become authentic only when

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<sup>38</sup> C. S. Song, Third-Eye Theology (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), 44.



rooted in the history and struggle of the poor and the oppressed.<sup>39</sup>

Certainly, the Gospel brings new elements into any given culture. For the Vietnamese, the Biblical message of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection--which is unique--certainly will bring them a living hope. Moltmann in his Theology of Hope argues:

Eschatology does not mean merely salvation of the soul, individual rescue from the evil world, comfort for the troubled conscience, but also the realization of the eschatological hope of justice, the humanizing of man, the socializing of humanity, peace for all creation.<sup>40</sup>

C. S. Song also asserts that the God of Asia is the God of hope, and as the God of hope, that God is powerful. The power of hope, rooted in the suffering love of God, is the greatest power. Song says that the cross of the risen Christ has proved to be a powerful image in addressing the historical realities of the peoples and nations in the Third World today. The cross ceases to be the spiritual symbol of the Christian church alone, but becomes a symbol of hope as well as the suffering of people who long for liberation from the bondage of the body and the spirit.<sup>41</sup> The Christian hope of the resurrection, as distinct from the common view of immortality, is an example with profound implications for

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<sup>39</sup> "The Final Statement" [Asian Theological Conference, Sri Lanka, 1979], in Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity, ed. Virginia Fabella (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1980), 157.

<sup>40</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, Theology of Hope, trans. J. W. Leitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 21.

<sup>41</sup> C. S. Song, Third-Eye Theology, 177-93.

one's attitude about the body.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the Gospel, in bringing with it new understanding of love, forgiveness, faith, and hope, also brings a new understanding of society.<sup>43</sup>

The context is very important in doing ministry. Human beings have been created in the image of God and every person is equal in the eyes of God. The cross of Christianity is concerned with deliverance of people from pain and suffering. It is for people that God sent his Son to do theology in Sitz im Leben (Situation in Life). In order to do a theology in Asian contexts, Koyama proposes a theology of the crucified mind. The crucified mind, the mind of Christ, is the mind that values its own life less because of its unquenchable love for the people. It is not the crusading mind that conquers the world but the crucified mind that can meaningfully participate in authentic contextualization, which is accommodational and prophetic. For Koyama, the West came to the East with the crusading mind and the feeling that they were the superior, chosen race. Theology must be pursued with the crucified mind, not with the crusading mind. The priority for Asian theologians is to examine Asia's experience of the impact of modernization in the context of a particular cultural orbit.

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<sup>42</sup> Nicholls, "Towards a Theology of Gospel and Culture," 62.

<sup>43</sup> Nicholls, "Towards a Theology of Gospel and Culture," 61.

Koyama emphasizes that the Christian message in Western forms often invites cultural resistance, psychological antipathy, and emotional reaction.<sup>44</sup>

In summary, it is necessary to maintain a contextualized theology. Every theology which expresses Christian truth is to be embodied and translated in a concrete historical situation. In this sense, contextualization involves dynamic interaction of the Biblical text and the historical context, between the Gospel and the culture. Therefore, doing theology within an Asian context is not a matter of conforming or adapting Western theology but, as Koyama says, seasoning theology with "Aristotelian pepper and Buddhist salt."<sup>45</sup> This also does not mean setting aside the long tradition of useful theological activity in the West. It means rather that the Asians must understand the Gospel in relation with their unique experiences. In this sense, theological reflection in Asia must begin with an interest in Asian peoples.

In Vietnam, a country of various religions and beliefs, doing theology must be an attempt to incorporate concepts and customs of other religions into Christianity. Of course, up to a certain point this can be acceptable but beyond that point it may become unwarranted. Obviously, it

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<sup>44</sup> Kosuke Koyama, Waterbuffalo Theology (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1974), 181.

<sup>45</sup> See Koyama, Waterbuffalo Theology, 78-94.

is not easy to set a boundary for contextualization. Certainly, God is revealed through human cultural aspects. However, contextualization does not mean conforming with any culture. Stephen B. Bevans is right when he contends that "Theology that is contextual realizes that culture, history, contemporary thought forms, and so forth are to be considered, along with scripture and tradition, as valid sources for theological expression."<sup>46</sup> Theology is contextual; but it is not only particular but also universal, because God is the God of both universality and particularity. Both theology and culture are not static but dynamic, because humanity is always in the process of becoming; and God is the God of both transcendence (unchanging) and immanence (changing). In general, we can say that, on the one hand, the Gospel must be translated in terms of the needs of the whole person and society, on religious, social, economic and political levels of culture without changing its fundamental message. On the other hand, the Gospel must penetrate and transform every level of culture. In this way true contextualization can take place. These accommodational and prophetic concepts can be accepted to a certain extent as long as the biblical interpretations of God and Word are understood without being distorted. The Gospel comes to make people understand God more fully and

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<sup>46</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992), 2.

then help them overcome the negative side of the culture. With its healing power, the Gospel transforms the culture into perfection.

Traditional theology which has been shaped by the Western cultures tends to despise a popular expression of faith. For example, when a Vietnamese converts to Christianity, she/he is taught to cease practicing the cult of ancestors and take down the altars. Consequently, the Christians are criticized for filial impiety. In such a case, it is necessary to re-interpret the culture in line with the Gospel rather than destroy or despise it. It is necessary to let the Asian peoples express their faith through their worldviews, cosmologies, spiritualities and religious aspirations which are rooted deeply in their cultures and strongly influence all aspects of their lives. In the context of their own history, culture, situation, and experiences, the Vietnamese Christians should formulate their own theology which, like other theologies of the Third World, is an attempt of the Christian church to liberate itself from a Westernized Christianity. The incarnation of the transcendent God needs to be now conceived to be at work in the whole history and culture of the nation. This requires a critical reaffirmation of Vietnamese culture and traditions, and of the struggle for liberation of the people who have suffered from foreign invasions, wars, and poverty. They have painful experiences of exploitation and

oppression. True theology must be born out of a crisis in the human community. Vietnamese theology must be a distinct theology which emerges from concrete experiences and situations of the people, which is expressed within and through the Vietnamese cultural and historical contexts.

### CHAPTER 3

#### Vietnamese Culture: A Theological Consideration

##### The National Character

##### The Country

Vietnam, lying in the central part of Southeast Asia, is an elongated S-shaped land with two large ends and a narrow middle. The Vietnamese often describe their country like two rice baskets at the opposite ends of a don ganh (carrying pole). Don ganh--a carrying pole--is made from a length of split bamboo stem which, when carried over the shoulder, supports a rice basket at each end. The rice baskets, the deltas of the Red River in the North and the Mekong in the South, are connected by a narrow strip of mountainous country like a carrying pole. This image is quite accurate, since wide river deltas in the North and South make conditions ideal for growing rice.

Looking at a map, one can see Vietnam has a rather diversified topography. Mountains and hills cover four-fifths of the territory. It is essentially tropical with a humid monsoon climate. Vietnam shares the border with China, Laos, and Cambodia, and has Thailand, Burma, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Burnei as neighbors.

### The People

Vietnam has 54 ethnic groups. The Viet or Kinh (mainly in the plains), the majority people, account for 88 percent of the country's population of 66.3 million. The common national language, Vietnamese, is spoken by over 80 percent of the population. The ethnic minorities in general speak Vietnamese in addition to their own languages.<sup>1</sup>

### The Vietnamese Roots

According to legendary sources, over four thousand years ago there lived a king named Lac Long who descended from a dragon. He married a fairy named Au Co and had with her a brood of one hundred eggs, which hatched one hundred children. These were the first Vietnamese. Due to racial difference, they could not live a happy life together. One day King Lac Long said to his wife, "I'm of the Dragon race, you of that of the Fairies, we cannot live together, we must separate. Please go to the mountains. As for me, I prefer the sea, but before we separate, let us divide our children equally between us." Then King Lac Long took fifty of his sons down to the sea. The other half accompanied their mother up to the mountains. Later on, King Lac Long put his first son on the throne with the title of Hung Vuong. King Hung Vuong named the country Van Lang.<sup>2</sup> Since then, the

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<sup>1</sup> Viet Tien et al., A Handbook for the English Language Translator (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Ngoai Van, 1989), 179.

<sup>2</sup> Dien Van Tran, Once in Vietnam (Lincolnwood, Ill.: National Textbook, 1983), 5-8.



name has been changed many times to become successively Au Lac, Nam Viet, Giao Chi, Giao Chau, Van Xuan, An Nam, Dai Co Viet, Dai Ngu, Dai Viet, Vietnam (King Gia Long, 1802), Dai Viet (again with King Minh Mang in 1832), and finally, Vietnam in 1945.<sup>3</sup> The name of the first (and largely mythical) dynasty of Vietnam was of the Hong Bang family that traditionally was dated from 2879 to 258 B.C.<sup>4</sup> Hong Bang refers to mythological birds whose wingspan is supposed to cover the ocean.

The legend of the Vietnamese roots reflects the blood-sealed ties among the people living on the Vietnamese territory which has gone through many tribulations. According to the legend, these 100 children inherited bravery and friendliness from their father, King Lac Long, and beauty, charm, and grace from their mother, the goddess Au Co. The Vietnamese have proved their bravery by fighting very courageously against invaders throughout their long history, and at the same time have proved to be a charming and gracious people. Today, the Vietnamese still proudly claim they are "Con Rong Chau Tien" (the offspring of a dragon and a fairy). For the Vietnamese, one cannot define one's identity unless one remembers one's roots and

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<sup>3</sup> Vinh Kim Pham, The Vietnamese Culture (Solana Beach, Calif.: Pham Kim Vinh Research Institute, 1990), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Duong Cao Pham, Lich Su Dan Toc Viet Nam [A history of the Vietnamese people] (Fountain Valley, Calif.: Truyen Thong Viet, 1987), 38.

ancestors. From that belief, successive generations of Vietnamese have stood side by side one another, shedding sweat and blood to defend and build up their homeland. Vietnam has spent a lot of time and energy resisting all kinds of natural disasters and enemy destruction so as to stand firm in the face of all trials.

### Historical Setting

Vietnam is a country with a 4,000-year history. According to archaeologists, by 2000 B.C. North Vietnam was the center of an extensive Bronze Age civilization, located at Dong Son, south of present-day Hanoi. By 700 B.C. on the plains of the Red and Black rivers, a succession of eighteen Hung kings ruled over the Lac Viet.<sup>5</sup>

In 111 B.C. the northern part of what is now Vietnam was conquered by the armies of the Chinese emperor. Later, Chinese rule extended south and lasted nearly a thousand years. The power of China was supreme. An Nam, another name of Vietnam, literally means "the pacified south," yet An Nam was far from being pacified. Its people often revolted against the Chinese yoke. In A.D. 40 one of the Vietnamese noblemen was executed. His widow and her sister, Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, raised an army, slaughtered the Chinese garrison, and became joint queens. Though they were later defeated, the Trung sisters are often described as the Vietnamese Joan of Arc. Joan was declared to be a saint,

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<sup>5</sup> Duong Cao Pham, 38, 51.

but the Trung sisters are actually worshipped as gods. The Chinese conquest of Vietnam lasted one thousand years, but those years were not quite as pacified as the name An Nam would suggest. At least ten major rebellions occurred from 111 B.C. to A.D. 938, when Ngo Quyen defeated Chinese troops at the Bach Dang River and made himself king of a free Vietnam. In 1010 Thang Long (literally "Soaring Dragon") became the capital of Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> Although the Vietnamese were independent for nearly nine hundred years thereafter, they had to repel Chinese armies again and again throughout the centuries. The patriotic spirit of Vietnam can be read in the poem that Ly Thuong Kiet composed in 1076 to rally his troops against the latest invasion.

The mountains of the South  
 Belong to the Viet of the South  
 This is written in the Celestial Book  
 Those who try to conquer this land  
 Will surely suffer defeat.<sup>7</sup>

In 1802, the Nguyen Dynasty began. With the help of both French and Thai armies, Nguyen Anh defeated the populist Tay Son. In 1858 French troops attacked Danang, and in 1861 Saigon fell to the French and Vietnam became a French colony in 1867. In 1883 the French consolidated rule over Vietnam and formed French Indochina including Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. With the collapse of France in 1940, the

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<sup>6</sup> John Balaban, Vietnam: The Land We Never Knew (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1989), 33.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Balaban, 20.

French yielded Indochina to the Japanese who set up an administration under Bao Dai, the last Nguyen emperor.<sup>8</sup>

In 1945 Bao Dai abdicated in favor of the Viet Minh led by Ho Chi Minh who were struggling for the independence of Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Hanoi. In 1946, French troops sold Haiphong harbor and reentered Hanoi. The Indochina War began. In 1954, the French was defeated at Dien Bien Phu. Vietnam was temporarily divided under the Geneva Accord which proclaimed an end to the Indochina war. The South of Vietnam, with the support of the United States, proclaimed itself the Republic of Vietnam with Ngo Dinh Diem as president and Saigon as capital. US troops in South Vietnam numbered 3,200 in 1961 then 500,000 in 1968. On August 23, 1972 the last American ground combat battalion left Vietnam. In April 1975, Saigon fell to the Communists and was then unified under the Communist regime.<sup>9</sup>

For the Vietnamese people, the homeland is of sacred value. They love their country where they have lived for four thousand years and have had to pay in blood to protect it. Of course, resistance to foreign aggression and domination is not an exclusive characteristic of any country. However, it can be said that not many countries

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<sup>8</sup> Kim Trong Tran, Viet Nam Su Luoc [A brief history of Vietnam] (Saigon: Tan Viet, 1964), 21-52.

<sup>9</sup> Balaban, 35.

have had to resist foreign aggression and domination so continually and in such difficult and hard conditions as Vietnam. Having had to endure the heavy consequences of war and to suffer foreign dominations through several centuries, the Vietnamese people cherish independence and freedom and thirst for peace and justice.<sup>10</sup> Balaban, an American author, observes that it is this awareness of Vietnamese history that gives the people a sense of identity that feeds their national pride and independence.<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, no one can separate the history of a people from their culture. Preserving national culture is an element that brings strength for resisting imperialism and all forms of domination and oppression. Balaban poses the question, "What collective resources have given the Vietnamese the strength to prevail through the centuries and defeat the Chinese and the United States?," and he gives a good answer:

Surely some of the factors have to do with the domestic and international constraints placed upon our military operations, but other factors have to do with Vietnamese culture: perhaps it was the millennia of schooling in Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism that provided the Vietnamese with great reserves of clarity and courage in dealing with overwhelming foreign armies.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, these religions have influenced Vietnamese

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<sup>10</sup> Dan Van Tran, Vietnam, My Homeland (Hanoi: Su That, 1989), 34, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Balaban, 94.

<sup>12</sup> Balaban, 23.

culture and helped the people to keep on struggling for independence and freedom. As Balaban put it, from Taoism the Vietnamese have learned that power comes from harmony with heaven and with nature and how to yield so that the weak can overcome the strong; from Confucianism, they learned the importance of history and literature, respect for social order and authority; from Buddhism, the Vietnamese learned non-attachment to the material world, sacrifice for others, and how to calm and focus the mind.<sup>13</sup> Certainly, these cultural elements have empowered the people against all foreign invasions.

#### Language and Literature

Language. The Vietnamese language is tonal. This means that each word can have several different meanings, depending on the tone in which it is pronounced. There are other marks used above letters to show which tone should be used in pronouncing a word. For example, the word ma has six tones and even more than six different meanings. Ma, with a level tone means ghost, a high tone means mother or cheek, a low tone means but, that, or which; a wavy or rising tone means clever or tomb; a heavy tone means rice, pronounced with a sort of break (like ma-a) means horse. One can make silly mistakes by using the wrong tone. When you say, "Where is your mother?," if the wrong tone is used, you might ask, "Where is your tomb?" or "Where is your rice

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<sup>13</sup> Balaban, 23.

seedling?"<sup>14</sup> Since the Vietnamese language is monosyllabic, there are no words with more than one syllable.

Script. There are 3 scripts:

1. Chinese Han ideograms, used as the official and literary script until the beginning of the twentieth century.

2. The nom script, invented by the poet Han Thuyen in the thirteenth century, was derived from the Han script to transcribe the popular national language. It is a script using combinations and modifications of Chinese characters for writing non-Chinese Vietnamese words. Although it was an ingenious innovation this writing system remained complicated and unsuceptible to popularization on a large scale.<sup>15</sup> Nom literature paralleled Han scholarly literature until the beginning of the twentieth century).

3. Quoc ngu (national script), a romanized script, was first introduced in the seventeenth century by European missionaries to propagate Catholicism. Among these missionaries, a French priest Alexandre de Rhodes (1591-1660), made the greatest contribution to the formation of quoc ngu with his production of the first prayer book in Latin and quoc ngu and with his publication of a Vietnamese-

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<sup>14</sup> Bernard Newman, Let's Visit Vietnam (Bridgeport, Conn.: Burke Books, 1983), 22-23.

<sup>15</sup> Vinh Kim Pham, 138.

Portuguese-Latin dictionary in 1651.<sup>16</sup> From then on, the Vietnamese used the Roman alphabet and wrote Vietnamese phonetically with accent marks to indicate different tones. Prayer books were published in quoc ngu for the Vietnamese Christians, who were taught this romanized script. Gradually quoc ngu became the national written language of the Vietnamese, an efficient cultural tool for their advancement.<sup>17</sup> By the 1920s, quoc ngu had indeed superseded Chinese characters and chu nom and had become the common method of writing for the Vietnamese people. It has been a powerful vehicle for the rapid expansion of culture and for the publication of considerable literary, philosophical, scientific and artistic works of Vietnamese authors.<sup>18</sup> It was used by the French colonialists as the administrative and educative script. It then became an efficient tool for patriotic movements. Now it is used in all fields of life in Vietnam.

Written literature. The Vietnamese language uses the Roman alphabet. It also has numerous accent marks that help the reader in pronunciation. Because of its melodic sound, poetry recited aloud has always been more popular than

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<sup>16</sup> Thanh Ngoc Hoang, "Quoc Ngu and the Development of Modern Vietnamese Literature," in Aspects of Vietnamese History, ed. Walter F. Vella (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1973), 192.

<sup>17</sup> Vinh Kim Pham, 194.

<sup>18</sup> Vinh Kim Pham, 138.



literature that is read silently. Yet there are epic stories in Vietnam that, like most poems, are derived from the Chinese. The hopes and dreams of the nation are reflected in these epics, which tell of heroes and their efforts to save family and nation. Even today, after generations of conflict, the people still memorize classic Vietnamese poetry and write their own verses. Poetry is much more common in Vietnam than in many other countries.

Vietnam's most famous epic poem is Kim Van Kieu, the story of a girl's struggle to maintain the honor of her family. The plot is long and involved, yet many Vietnamese have memorized the entire poem. Kim Van Kieu is a reflection of the Vietnamese soul. Imbued with patriotic and humanitarian feelings, Vietnamese literature reflects the fight of the whole nation against foreign invasions, feudal, colonial and imperialist oppression.

#### Religious Background

Living in a land of various religions, most Vietnamese do not consider themselves to be purely of one religion, although there are several religions and beliefs which have had a profound impact on the people and their culture. Several beliefs and religions have intermingled in the popular mind. Most Vietnamese people do not belong to organized religions, yet the Vietnamese way of life reflects a conception of life close to a religion. Observing the religious life of the people, John Balaban writes:

Without any conflicts of piety or ethics, a person can practice all of these religions in one day, depending on how he or she responds to family, to self, to other villagers, to the needy, and to ancestors.<sup>19</sup>

Animism. According to Thuy Gia Vuong, animist beliefs in good and evil spirits existed since ancient times, antedating the organized faiths, and have permeated Vietnamese society.<sup>20</sup>

Most every Vietnamese family has a shrine in a corner of their house, with an array of gods. The gods and spirits are supposed to live in trees, rivers, or animals. A pagoda may display as few as a dozen or as many as a hundred gods. Believers think that such things as storm clouds, forests, or rivers have souls. They believe that each person does have a spirit which continues to exist after death. The dead must be properly buried with solemn ceremonies; otherwise, the spirit of the dead could wander eternally. Vietnamese animists often spend much of their thought, effort, energy, and wealth in observances and rites in order to influence the spirits, expecting the spirits to bless and not to bother the living. This belief is popular in Vietnam, especially in the rural areas.

Confucianism. Confucianism was brought to Vietnam by the Chinese. During the one-thousand-year Chinese domination, the Vietnamese came to know the teachings of

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<sup>19</sup> Balaban, 67.

<sup>20</sup> Thuy Gia Vuong, Getting to Know the Vietnamese and Their Culture (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1976), 12.

Confucius well. However, the Vietnamese usually understand Confucianism in terms of morality rather than by metaphysics. Vietnamese Confucianists emphasize Tam Cuong (three principle precepts), namely, quan than, phu tu, phu phu, which prescribe the correct relationship between king and subject, between father and son, and between husband and wife; and Ngu Thuong (five cardinal virtues) namely, Nhan, Nghia, Le, Tri, Tin (Benevolence, Loyalty, Politeness, Intelligence, and Trustworthiness).<sup>21</sup> The veneration of ancestors both by filial piety and observance of rites for ancestors was required. For women, they were demanded to live by Tu Duc (Four Virtues) as evidenced by their handicrafts, graceful appearance, refined speech, and modest demeanor. A woman was also bound with Tam Tong (Three Obligations) which means: before marriage, a woman was to obey her father; as a wife, obey her husband; and when widowed, to obey her son. High morals and ethics, honest government, and sound education were greatly valued.

According to Phu Hoang Le, when the first Protestant missionaries came to Vietnam, they witnessed a period of bitter struggle between Confucianists who represented Vietnam's traditions and sovereignty, and French colonists who endeavored to bring in Western cultural weapons to

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<sup>21</sup> See Anh Toan, Tin Nguong Viet Nam [Vietnamese beliefs] (Ho Chi Minh City: Nha Xuat Ban Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 1992), 145, 264. See also Le Hien Nguyen, Nha Giao Ho Khong [Confucius as a teacher] (Ho Chi Minh City: Nha Xuat Ban Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 1992), 23.

consolidate their rule of a newly conquered people.<sup>22</sup>

Confucianism was in decline and lost its dominant position before the end of French domination, but its basic concepts remained deeply imbedded in Vietnamese morality and values. Confucianism is no longer an organized religion in Vietnam, however, its humanist conceptions are still important in Vietnamese morality.

Taoism. Taoism is a religion founded by Lao Tsu in China even earlier than Confucianism. Reacting to the prevalent belief of his times in an overruling Heaven which acted according to his will, and obviously disgusted by the interminable wars and social upheavals which plagued Chinese during the declining Chou dynasty, Lao Tsu contended that heaven and earth are inhuman for they consider all beings as a straw dog.<sup>23</sup> This concept has influenced some Vietnamese writers in their view of Troi (Heaven). For example, Nguyen Gia Thieu in his Cung Oan Ngam Khuc [Elegy to an Odalisque] depicted "Tao Hoa" (Creator) as a naughty child whose capricious acts determined the fate of mankind.<sup>24</sup> Rejecting a personal sovereign, Lao Tsu admitted Dao (Tao, Way) which existed before the appearance of heaven and earth

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<sup>22</sup> Phu Hoang Le, "A Short History of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (1911-1965)" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1972), 56.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted by Anh Duy Dao in Viet Nam Van Hoa Su Cuong [A brief cultural history of Vietnam] (Ho Chi Minh City: Nha Xuat Ban Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 1992), 227.

<sup>24</sup> Phu Hoang Le, 57.

and constituted the origin of the universe.<sup>25</sup>

Taoism proposed a way of life by which human beings may attain harmony with nature and the mystical currents of the spiritual world. Since Lao Tse had the highest respect for nature, he believed that all things were governed by a "Tao" (the Way or Principle) that was independent and unchangeable in its functioning and which did not need help or interference from any heavenly or human agency. The human, therefore, must keep his mind and heart calm and peaceful and follow nature's way and order. A upright person has no attachment to this life nor any fear of death, for he returns to heaven upon death.<sup>26</sup> For Lao Tse, the human's relationship with the universe was very important. The concepts of Tao (the Way) and vo vi luan (nonacting doctrine) have strongly influenced the Vietnamese view of life and this can be found in Vietnamese oral and written literature.

In fact, as a religion, Taoism did affect the cultural patterns of the Vietnamese--such as ideas observed in older medical practices, consultation of horoscopes in making marriage arrangements, selection of auspicious dates, ceremonies of worship for seasonal ploughing of land and planting of seed.<sup>27</sup> Other influential things about the

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<sup>25</sup> Anh Duy Dao, 227.

<sup>26</sup> Anh Duy Dao, 280-81.

<sup>27</sup> Vinh Kim Pham, 115.

religion include geomancy. Accordingly, the importance of how things line up with the earth is stressed. Where to build a house, where to dig a grave, the direction your front door faces -- all of these things and more are of concern to the Vietnamese. Many Vietnamese, regardless of religion, level of education, or ideology, are influenced by such practices as astrology, geomancy, and sorcery.

Diviners and other specialists in the occult remain in popular demand because they are believed to be able to diagnose supernatural causes of illness, establish lucky dates for personal undertakings, or predict the future. Many Vietnamese believe that individual destiny is guided by astrological phenomenon. By consulting one's horoscope, one can make the most of auspicious times and avoid disaster.<sup>28</sup>

In Vietnam, Taoism has degenerated into a system of magic. Its individualistic mysticism and tendency to accommodate to nature have appealed to the common people of Vietnam. Few Vietnamese today practice this religion, but many have been somewhat influenced by its tenets.

Buddhism. Buddhism was introduced into Vietnam from India in the early Christian era, between A.D. 159 and A.D. 189.<sup>29</sup> At that time, Vietnam was dominated by China and society was divided into two distinct classes. The

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<sup>28</sup> Ronald J. Cima, ed., Vietnam: A Country Study (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Army, 1989), 128.

<sup>29</sup> Do Tran, ed., Van Hoa Viet Nam [The Vietnamese culture] (Hanoi: Ban Van Hoa Van Nghe Trung Uong, 1989), 212.

upper class consisted of Chinese mandarins and their Vietnamese followers. Their outlook was based on Confucianism and native animistic beliefs. The lower class was comprised of peasants growing rice. They believed that the power of Heaven above could reward good actions and punish evil ones. Both classes soon found Buddhism alien when it was introduced into Vietnam for it was not only incompatible with existing beliefs but also gave new explanations about human's misfortunes and their causes.

Buddhism did have features in common with popular beliefs of the peasants. The new doctrine gave people a way to free themselves from the misery they had suffered for generations. It called for mercy, corresponding to the wishes of people afflicted with bad luck and sorrow. For these reasons Buddhism quickly took root and flourished in Vietnam.<sup>30</sup> The Luy Lau area of Giao Chau (North Vietnam) soon became the first center of Buddhism.<sup>31</sup> Tuong Van Vo affirmed that Luy Lau Buddhism with its Dau Pagoda presents the world outlook and psychology of the farmers and local people of the Red River Delta.<sup>32</sup> A verse of one folk song is as follows:

Du ai di dau ve dau

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<sup>30</sup> Thu Tai Nguyen, ed., History of Buddhism in Vietnam (Hanoi: Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1992), 3.

<sup>31</sup> Tuong Van Vo, Viet Nam Danh Lam Co Tu [Vietnam's famous ancient pagodas] (Hanoi: Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1992), xxi.

<sup>32</sup> Vo, xxii.

He trong thay thap Chua Dau thi ve  
 [Although you are going everywhere,  
 You would return to Dau pagoda's stupa  
 when seeing it]<sup>33</sup>

The popular saying, "Vui nhu tray hoi chua" (Merry as going to the pagoda's Festival), has referred to a fine cultural custom of the people.

Buddhism, which is in fact profound, has become very close and relevant to everyone and suitable to the religious thinking of the Vietnamese people. Buddha has been considered as a god who has great magic power and always appears to help the good doers as well as punish the evil ones. The Buddhists believe that people are born again and again and again, in human and animal forms. A good person, the Buddhists say, keeps being born into better lives and eventually reaches Nirvana.

Buddhism is a religion of personal examination and experience, with no formal services. Believers go to Buddhist shrines to get into the proper frame of mind for self-improvement by looking inward. Meditative contemplation is very important for the Vietnamese Buddhists. Through quietude and sublimation, pure energy is elevated, while impure energy is eliminated. Pure energy is related to the energy frequency of the mind. Therefore, it is necessary to keep the mind free from any distraction so that the pure energy can elevate to infinity, while the

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<sup>33</sup> Vo, xxviii.



impure energy will be filtered out.

There are different kinds of Buddhism in Vietnam. Mahayana Buddhism has quickly become the faith of most Vietnamese, whereas Theravada (or Hinayana) Buddhism was confined mostly to the southern delta region. The Mahayana school teaches that Gautama was only one of many "enlightened ones" manifesting the fundamental divine power of the universe; the Theravada school teaches that Gautama was the one-and-only enlightened one and the great teacher, but that he was not divine. The Mahayana sect holds further that all followers of Buddha can attain Nirvana, whereas the Theravada school believes only monks can make it. Ronald J. Cima contends that the Mahayana ceremony easily conformed to indigenous Vietnamese beliefs, which combined folklore with Confucian and Taoist teachings, and that Mahayana's enlightened ones were venerated alongside various animist spirits.<sup>34</sup>

Catholicism. European missionaries brought the Catholic religion into Vietnam in the early sixteenth century. Saint Odorico de Pordenone and Saint Francis Xavier were considered the first who arrived in Vietnam to propagate the Catholic faith in the fourteenth century.<sup>35</sup> Under French rule, Roman Catholicism established a solid position in Vietnamese society. The French encouraged Roman

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<sup>34</sup> Cima, 121.

<sup>35</sup> Toan, 22.

Catholicism to serve as a vehicle for the further dissemination of Western culture.<sup>36</sup> Under several emperors of the Nguyen dynasty, the Catholics were severely persecuted. The main reason was that Vietnamese emperors wanted to defend the culture of the people. Vietnamese emperors did not ban Roman Catholicism because of fanaticism, but because they wanted to defend national unity, both moral and political. They considered the Catholics' refusal to worship their ancestors a threat to this national unity.<sup>37</sup> Therefore afterwards, in order to make the Catholic religion acceptable to the people, spokesmen for Catholicism pointed out that cultural patterns which were not in conflict with church theology may be practiced. Thereafter, ancestor veneration is practiced in nearly all Vietnamese Roman Catholic homes.<sup>38</sup>

Protestantism. Protestantism was first introduced to Danang, central Vietnam, in 1911 by the missionaries of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, an organization which played the most important role in the growth of the Protestant Church there. Between 1911 and 1927, the Protestant faith spread from Danang to four of the five states of French Indochina, and totaled eighty-two churches

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<sup>36</sup> Cima, 123.

<sup>37</sup> Phu Hoang Le, 83.

<sup>38</sup> Vinh Kim Pham, 118.

and Gospel halls with a membership of 4,236.<sup>39</sup> In 1927, the Christian and Missionary Alliance attained its first goal: the Evangelical Church of Vietnam was organized as a national body. It also marked the graduation of the first Protestant theological students in Vietnam, the first ordination service of locally trained ministers, and the first constitutional conference of the national church.<sup>40</sup>

Concerning the propagation of Protestantism , Phu Hoang Le writes,

The religious situation which the first Protestant missionaries faced in Vietnam was the complex result of the interplay of three major Oriental religions, namely Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, extending over eighteen centuries. This condition was further enlivened by the advent of a Christian faith, Roman Catholicism, in the 16th century, and its astounding advances in the 19th century, while the whole nation was engaged in a life-and-death struggle between western and traditional cultures.<sup>41</sup>

Anh Duy Dao argued that most Vietnamese people did not accept Christianity because, for them, it rejected the cult of ancestors which had been the cultural tradition of the people and was considered the way to express the filial piety of the Vietnamese people.<sup>42</sup>

At the end of 1972, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam reported 45,287 baptized members and a total community of

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<sup>39</sup> Phu Hoang Le, 162.

<sup>40</sup> Phu Hoang Le, 172-78.

<sup>41</sup> Phu Hoang Le, 39.

<sup>42</sup> Anh Duy Dao, 252.

130,000 with 490 congregation and 424 official pastors.<sup>43</sup>

In the early 1980s, Protestants number between 100,000 and 200,000.<sup>44</sup>

Caodai. Caodai, which literally means "High Tower" or the "Supreme Being," was founded as an indigenous Vietnamese religion in 1919 in the city of Tay Ninh. This is a syncretistic blend of Asian and Western religion, including Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Caodai is an attempt to unite all religions into one body, for a universal harmony of religions, according to its believers, is necessary for the progress of humankind.<sup>45</sup> The Confucian doctrines of Tam Cuong (three principal precepts); Ngu Thuong (five constant virtues); Trung Dung (the Way of Mean); the Buddhist concepts of Karma, Dukka, Eightfold Way; the Taoist ways of "soul and body improvement" and "perfecting of character," and the Christian teachings of love, tolerance, humility, and faith of Christianity, are all included in Caodaist tenets.<sup>46</sup> Caodai recognizes a Sovereign Lord who is the Creator of all beings. This is the One who is depicted as omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent all over the universe, who is perfectly good,

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<sup>43</sup> Vietnam Statistical Yearbook, 1971 (Saigon: National Institute of Statistics, 1972), 127-30.

<sup>44</sup> Cima, 128.

<sup>45</sup> Toan, 412.

<sup>46</sup> Phu Hoang Le, 90.

greatly merciful, invisible and everlasting. This is the One who has many names. Caodaism venerates all saints, including Christ, Buddha, and other religious figures, plus great men and women down through history. For example, Joan of Arc is considered a Caodai saint. Observing this new indigenous religion, Phu Hoang Le writes,

The first Protestant missionaries in Vietnam found a deeply religious people who were eager to learn of new concepts of metaphysics and ethics to cope with the rapidly changing society of their time. This relative openness of mind made the encounter between religious representatives of most faiths more or less smooth and productive, especially during the first two decades of the Protestant presence in the country.<sup>47</sup>

Caodai claims a total membership of 2,000,000 in South Vietnam.<sup>48</sup> The Caodaist faith has spread rapidly and made significant advances because it strongly appeals to the animist-oriented people in Southern Vietnam and emphasizes relief work to the poor.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, this is also a religion which upholds the unity of all humankind of every period, the living and the dead. Although some criticize Caodai as a religion that has too many objects to worship, it is necessary to remark that this is a religion generated from a generous conception in fact embedded in the Vietnamese thought.

Hoa Hao. Hoa Hao, a version of Buddhism, has more than

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<sup>47</sup> Phu Hoang Le, 96.

<sup>48</sup> Vinh Kim Pham, 118.

<sup>49</sup> Phu Hoang Le, 95-96.

a million followers in the Mekong Delta (South Vietnam) and was founded there earlier in the twentieth century by Huynh Phu So, a twenty-one-year-old son of a wealthy village official.<sup>50</sup> After a life of physical weakness and infirmity, he was miraculously healed and began to proclaim his doctrine of Buddhist reform. His religion is generally accepted as Buddhist and its history has been one of political and military, as well as religious, activity. His teachings were strongly anti-French and anti-communist.

The founder, Huynh Phu So, preferred to retire to solitary places to concentrate on his meditations. He determined to remain unmarried in his religious pursuits, in keeping with the Buddhist monastic traditions. He always considered his religion as a reformed Buddhism. Hoa Hao wants to return to basic Buddhist precepts, accordingly, there is no need for elaborate temples, statues, monks, and other outward forms of Buddhism. Instead, it emphasizes individual worship to attain richer spiritual experience and hard work toward salvation.<sup>51</sup> Generally speaking, Hoa Hao followed the lines of Tinh Do Tong (The Pure Land Sect) and emphasizes four commandments: honor your parents; love your country; be grateful to the Tam Bao (the Three Precious Things in Buddhism, namely Buddha, Buddhist doctrines, and Buddhist priests); and be grateful to your countryfellow

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<sup>50</sup> Toan, 382.

<sup>51</sup> Vinh Kim Pham, 117.

and the whole of humanity.<sup>52</sup> This indigenous religion had a special appeal to the common people by its very simplicity of doctrines, ritual, and practices.

An estimate put the Hoa Hao membership between 750,000 and 1,000,000, which has been concentrated in the western and southern provinces of the Mekong Delta of South Vietnam.<sup>53</sup>

The cult of ancestor. Vietnamese people rank filial piety as the first of all virtues. Since early childhood, Vietnamese children have memorized the following verses:

Cong cha nhu nui Thai Son,  
Nghia me nhu nuoc trong nguon chay ra.  
Mot long tho me kinh cha,  
Cho tron chu hieu moi la dao con.  
[Father's merits are high as the Thai mountain,  
Mother's love is like spring water flowing endlessly  
Venerating and honoring your parents,  
You become a filial child]

Filial piety as the most fundamental ethical principle is not limited to serving parents while they are living, but also after they die. For the Vietnamese, filial piety is always associated with ancestor worship, the most important national ritual. It expresses filial piety for the dead. Under Confucian influence, the Vietnamese have been taught that "when parents are alive, serve them according to ritual. When they die, bury them according to ritual and

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<sup>52</sup> Toan, 397.

<sup>53</sup> Phu Hoang Le, 75.

sacrifice to them according to ritual."<sup>54</sup>

For the Vietnamese, filial piety maintains the ancestor worship.

Fostering filial piety was of overriding importance in childbearing. Children were expected to be polite to their parents and older persons, to be solicitous of their welfare, to show them respect through proper manner and forms of address, and to carry out prescribed tradition with respect to funeral practices and the observance of mourning. It was incumbent upon surviving children to honor their parents's memory through maintenance of the ancestors'cult.<sup>55</sup>

Actually, ancestor worship is not a religion. It is simply a way of expressing thankfulness to those who gave life. Vietnamese proverbs such as "Chim co to nguoi co tong," (Birds have nests, people have roots), or "Uong nuoc nho nguon," (Drinking water, remember its source) evidently reflect the Vietnamese thankfulness to ancestors.

The Vietnamese believe that death does not mean annihilation. After death, the soul wanders like an exile in space. It is the duty of the descendants to bring this soul back again to its family, to welcome it at the ancestral altar and to worship it.<sup>56</sup> In the countryside, the deceased are often buried right in the family rice fields, sometimes in the backyard. Vietnamese people always like to live close to their relatives, both living and dead.

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<sup>54</sup> Arthur Waley, trans., The Analects of Confucius (New York: Vintage Books, 1938), 89.

<sup>55</sup> Cima, 115.

<sup>56</sup> Tung Van Tran, Vietnam (New York: Praeger, 1959), 46.



Most Vietnamese homes maintain altars to family ancestors. It is the altar that binds the family together. Celebration is an important occasion for the reunion of relatives and has played an important social role in maintaining family unity. Vertically, it is the unity between the ancestors and the descendants; horizontally, it is unity among the living family members. Moreover, by creating the structural unity of the family, ancestor worship also brings social unity and stability to the nation.

Even though ancestor worship is not a religion, it has been the most dominant religious feature of the Vietnamese. On the one hand, the cult is a way by which the living express respect and honor to their ancestors and filial piety to their late parents. On the other hand, the cult is also supposed to influence on the activities of the souls of the dead. According to Vietnamese beliefs, the dead intervene in the life of the living. After death, the souls of the dead wander from place to place until they find a resting place provided by their living descendants.<sup>57</sup> The Vietnamese believe that the life after death is somewhat similar to earthly life, therefore the living have to offer rice, betel nuts, clothing, money for the dead to respond their needs, and then the souls of the dead may phu ho (protect and assist) the living on earth.<sup>58</sup> The Vietnamese

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<sup>57</sup> Phu Hoang Le, 41.

<sup>58</sup> Toan, 24.

believe the dead are invisible yet present in their lives. Between the living and the dead there is still a close relationship through the cult. In other words, cult is the medium in which the dead and the living meet and communicate with each other.

Since Christianity was first introduced into Vietnam, Vietnamese Christians have been prohibited from practicing ancestor worship. In the eyes of the Western missionaries, ancestor worship is a kind of idol worship, therefore most Protestant Christians in Vietnam, influenced by this Western perspective, considered the practice of ancestor worship as incompatible with the Christian faith. Although ancestor worship in the Vietnamese tradition may carry with it negative aspects, no one can deny its positive aspects, such as its expressions of filial piety, the relationship between the dead and the living, the connection of generations, and the link of the past, the present, and the future. Therefore, it is necessary to re-interpret this tradition in line with the Gospel rather than abandon it.

Some general remarks on religions in Vietnam. Vietnam has no state religion. At first glance, some often think that Vietnam is a Buddhist nation. However, such observation is misleading. In Vietnam, there are several beliefs and religions which have a profound impact on the Vietnamese culture. All these various religions exist in harmony with each other. The original forms and practices

of religions and beliefs have become somewhat Vietnamized. For instance, Buddhism in Vietnam is not like Buddhism in Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, or Burma. Ways of practicing religion in Vietnam also vary according to classes and level of society, city dwellers and rural villagers. To the Vietnamese, religion is a way of life. Religion is so important that it would be almost impossible to separate religion from the way of life of the Vietnamese.

Vietnamese people are open-minded regarding the acceptance of religion. To them, when one religion is right, others are not necessarily wrong. One will find in Vietnam a tradition of religious tolerance inherited from the ancient Buddhists.

By and large, the Vietnamese do not follow one religion only, but a mixture of religion and religious philosophies. If a Vietnamese is a Buddhist, he not only practices Buddhism but also observes Confucian rituals and Taoist teachings, or may even strongly believe in animism. A Catholic might worship his ancestors and believe in the existence of spirits.<sup>59</sup>

### Philosophy and Spirituality

Troi (Heaven). Troi, or Ong Troi (Mr. Heaven), or Thuong De (Supreme Being) is a popular concept embedded in the lives of the Vietnamese. It is the belief in Troi that has impacted the view of ethics of the folk. Troi can understand human beings, may punish or reward them. Troi is close yet also distant. Human beings experience the power of Troi in natural phenomenon. Troi is not seen but is

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<sup>59</sup> Vuong, 12.

present among people, ready to hear prayers and save persons in need. Troi shows his compassion but Troi also punishes the wicked, even in this earthly life. Troi is honored and worshipped by folk in various forms. Daily language as well as oral and written folk literatures are filled with the concept of Troi. This concept manifests itself obviously in the lives of people. "Troi oi" (Oh Heaven) are words frequently uttered from the mouths of Vietnamese people. The following popular folk song is a prayer to Troi who is believed to hear and respond people's needs.

Lay Troi mua xuong  
Lay nuoc toi uong  
Lay ruong toi cay  
Lay bat com day  
Lay khuc ca to.  
[God, please make it rain  
So that I get water to drink  
So that I get a bowl of rice  
So that I beget fish in big slices].

The belief of Thien Menh (the Will of Heaven) or So Menh (the Heavenly Fate) prevails in Vietnamese spirituality and has been evidenced in Vietnamese literature, oral and written. For example, in his poem Chinh Phu Ngam (Complaints of a Warrior's Wife), Con Tran Dang (1710-1745) wrote:

Thuo troi dat noi con gio bui  
Khach ma hong nhieu noi truan chuyen  
Xanh kia tham tham tung tren  
Vi ai gay dung cho nen noi nay.<sup>60</sup>  
[When Heaven and Earth make storm arise

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<sup>60</sup> Con Tran Dang, Chinh Phu Ngam Khuc [Complaints of a warrior's wife], ed. Dang Van Luong (Hanoi: Dai Hoc, 1987), 34.

The beauty girl has to suffer  
Oh, Heaven above, who cause me to suffer?]

Du Nguyen (1765-1820) in his Kim Van Kieu, after describing the misfortunes of the heroine Kieu, concluded:

Ngam hay muon su tai Troi  
Troi kia da bat lam nguoi co than  
Bat phong tran phai phong tran  
Cho thanh cao moi duoc phan thanh cao.<sup>61</sup>  
[All things are caused by Heaven  
As predestined, you became a human being  
Due to the Will of Heaven, you are to suffer  
Due to the will of Heaven, you are to happy]

Kim Van Kieu (The Tale of Kieu) strongly reflects the deterministic belief of most Vietnamese people. One can say that besides its literary values, one of the factors that has made Kim Van Kieu popular is the concepts of Karma and Thien Menh (Will of God) which are predominant in the masterpiece. These beliefs often lead people to resign to Heavenly Fate, no matter how painful it may be. It is the belief in Troi's justice, wisdom, and goodness that helps people overcome the most severe situations which are beyond human understanding.

Thien, Dia, Nhan (heaven, earth, human beings). In Vietnamese thought, there is no question about the origin of life, or the beginning of life. Life has existed always, like the universe. The important question for the Vietnamese is not where or when human beings came from, but the question of Thien Menh (the will of Heaven). For them,

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<sup>61</sup> Du Nguyen, Kim Van Kieu [The tale of Kieu] (Hanoi: Thong Tin, 1983), 175.

seeking harmony with the will of Heaven is the way to happiness.

From ancient times, Vietnamese society has been an agrarian culture in which the ultimate origin of all existence and life is hypothetically called Troi (Heaven). However, as an agrarian people, the Vietnamese could not think about Heaven without the Earth because the earth is the source of life. In the farmer's eyes, they think of Heaven as the father, and of the Earth as mother (Cha Troi Me Dat). Heaven and Earth are not considered as two gods, but as one source of life. At this point, Andrew Chih has given an insightful observation from a Eastern perspective,

Heaven gives life by rain and sunshine, the Earth gives life by nourishing it. Together they strike sympathetic chords to the accompaniment of a love song which is an encomium of life. They represent one single all pervading vital impetus, not two gods. They were not regarded as two generating powers, but as one source of life, because, if not united as one, nothing would be produced. Thus, the terms "Heaven and Earth" denote the love of the one and single source of live, which is God.<sup>62</sup>

The dominant oriental philosophy of Yin (the negative element or principle of the female) and Yang (the positive element or principle of the male) prevail in the Vietnamese mentality. The universe is filled with two different sources of power, namely Yin and Yang. By the harmony and interplay of the two, the universe has been produced and sustained.

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<sup>62</sup> Andrew Chih, Chinese Humanism: A Religion Beyond Religion (Taiwan: Fu Jen Catholic University Press, 1981), 42.

The Vietnamese folktale "Banh Day Banh Chung" (The Rice Cakes) reflects the relation between Heaven and Earth. In the folktale, Tiet Lieu offers his father king two rice cakes; one is square and the other is round. For the Vietnamese, rice symbolizes life, the round shape for Troi (Heaven) and the square shape for Dat (earth). Heaven and earth interplay to produce life.

The Vietnamese concept of Troi is always linked with the concept of the human. In fact, the concept of God is still vague. Influenced by Confucianism, the Vietnamese contend that humanity is the virtue of heaven and earth, the union of Yin and Yang, the focus of the spirits, the essence of the five elements (metal, wood, water, fire, earth).<sup>63</sup> With this humanistic concept, the Vietnamese uphold a spirituality which implies a morality applicable to their daily life. In short, for the Vietnamese, Troi (Heaven), Dat (Earth), and Nhan (Human beings) intermingle and co-exist in unity.

Death. Most Vietnamese believe in Nghiep (Karma) and Thien Menh (the Will of Heaven) and a life after death with reward and punishment. It is this belief that gives them a power to endure all kinds of suffering and the attitude of acceptance toward the death. For the Vietnamese, death is simply a beginning of a new existence. By "Sinh Quy Tu Qui"

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<sup>63</sup> Kim Trong Tran, Nho Giao [Confucianism] (Saigon: Trung Tam Hoc Lieu, 1971), 71.

(Life is temporary, death is coming back), they prefer to call the time to die as "the time to come back to the origin," like a person coming back after a journey. They believe death is the time to go a better existence and it is worth celebrating. Therefore, as Pham Kim Vinh observes, the Vietnamese use the color white for mourning rather than black. White is bright, not gloomy. This is a special concept of the Vietnamese people regarding death.<sup>64</sup>

#### Way of life

Social customs. To elders and superiors, Vietnamese people always show great respect. "Kinh lao dac tho" (Respect for elders leads to longevity) is a saying familiar to the Vietnamese. They usually bow their heads or clasp both hands against their chests to "chao" (say hello) elders or superiors. Shaking hands is still unfamiliar with villagers and has not been adopted by most Vietnamese women. The Vietnamese have several implicit communication patterns that can lead to misunderstanding by one who does not share them. For example, a loud voice and a warm hearty greeting are often ways in which Americans communicate welcome. To the Vietnamese, however, these actions are rude and unseemly in a person of authority. A quiet, dignified, and restrained voice and manner are expected. A smile in American culture usually means happiness, often assent. For the Vietnamese it may also communicate anger, embarrassment,

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<sup>64</sup> Vinh Kim Pham, 130.



rejection, and other emotions as well. Smiling may reflect stoic behavior. Eye contact also has different meanings to the two cultural groups. Americans think an unwillingness to look someone in the face as a negative, even suspicious trait. For the Vietnamese to look directly at a person with whom they are speaking is a sign of disrespect and rudeness. When speaking to an older person or one in authority, the Vietnamese will glance up occasionally, but usually will keep their eyes down. Social touching of the opposite sex is usually not done in the Vietnamese culture, but touching between persons of the same sex is common. Persons of the same sex often walk together holding hands or arm in arm. This is merely a show of friendship and has no sexual meaning.<sup>65</sup> Kissing has to be done in private places, not in public--even between husband and wife.

In the countryside, chewing betel is common for villagers, especially for women. The betel leaf is supposed to be good for the teeth, and people use it like chewing-gum, spitting out its juice. The origin of this custom has been told as follows:

During the reign of King Hung Vuong lived two brothers of the Cao family. They looked so much alike that nobody in the village could tell which one was the older and which one was younger. The elder brother was Tan; the younger one was Lang. The brotherly love they had for each other was very strong. Tan was a married man, but Lang remained single. His parents often told

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<sup>65</sup> See Imogene C. Brower, "Counseling Vietnamese," in Counseling American Minorities, 2nd ed., eds. Donald R. Atkinson et al. (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1983), 107-32.

him to marry, but Lang did not want to follow his parents' advice because he thought he could not live with his brother if he had a family of his own. One day, the two brothers went hunting in the forest. Late in the afternoon, Lang felt tired and told his brother he was going home. When he got there, he saw Luu Xuan Phu, his brother's wife, sitting under a tree, waiting for her husband. She mistook Lang for her husband and then ran up to embrace him tenderly. Not understanding, he pushed her aside and walked away without a word. Day and night, he walked and walked without even knowing where he was going. He walked on and on until he collapsed from exhaustion. His body was turned into a big rock lying at a river. When Tan came home and heard his wife's story, he dejectedly sat down to wait for his brother. He waited and waited until the next morning, but his brother did not come back. He then left his wife to search for his brother. He went on and on, not having the slightest idea where to look. When he reached the river, tired from walking, he slumped down on the rock and died. His body was transformed into a green areca tree. Luu Xuan Phu waited at home for her husband to return. Finally she left the house to look for him. She, too, got to the river, fell at the rock and died instantly from exhaustion. Her body change into a plant climbing around the areca tree. The plant was called the betel. Many years later, that region suffered from a severe drought. Trees and plants died but the areca tree and the betel plant stayed green. People from neighboring villages heard about this and came to set up a temple and to offer gifts and prayers. One day, King Hung Vuong toured the country and happened to pass by. He stopped at the rock, plucked a betel leaf and munched it. The leaf tasted slightly, so he quickly picked an areca nut to chew. The hot taste became sweet in his mouth. When he spit out the mixture on the rock, to his surprise, it turned intensely red. Impressed by this, the King decided to publicize the use of these three ingredients among his people. Thus the practice of chewing betel in social gatherings was introduced in the country, and ever since there has been a popular saying: "Chewing betel is a good way to say hello."<sup>66</sup>

As tradition, at the marriage ritual, the betrothal gifts always include betel and the areca nut. When the missionaries came to Vietnam, they taught Vietnamese

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<sup>66</sup> See Dien Van Tran, 39-46; see also Anh Duy Dao, 188.

Christians to abandon the traditional habit of chewing betel. Because most Vietnamese have a great respect for tradition, this matter became a cultural clash.

Morality. The sense of morality is deeply rooted in the Vietnamese way of life. Vietnamese folk songs, proverbs, old stories and legends often admire and respect moral values. Moral beauty is always highly recommended. Vietnamese people prefer moral beauty to the material one. "Cai net danh chet cai dep" (the moral beauty wins the physical one) shows that they like to perceive the beauty in the inmost soul rather than in outward appearance.

The Vietnamese are a hospitable people. They have a habit of reserving the best place in the home and their best food to their guests. Vietnamese sayings such as "Tien vi khach, hau vi chu," (the guest comes first, the host comes second), or "Khach toi nha khong ga thi vit" (when a guest comes, the host has to prepare a table with chicken or duck) reflect their hospitality. The members of the family are ready to give up time for guests and are ready to serve in every possible way. In Vietnam, houses usually have wide doors and windows which are always open. From the street, one can see through the house and if one wants may step inside without hindrance. This is the sign of readiness for inviting people to come in.

Collective spirit. The collective spirit of the Vietnamese is also obvious. Vietnamese households often

include three or even four generations, typically consisting of grandparents, father and mother, children, and grandchildren, all living under the same roof.

The collective spirit is also found in the farming life. During the rice growing or harvest time, the villagers often share labors and borrow buffaloes from each other. They work together in the ricefields with joy.

Vinh Kim Pham gives another example of the collective spirit that can be found in the way the Vietnamese eat their meals. For Vietnamese, perhaps nuoc mam (fishsauce) is the next most important food after rice. It is a strong-smelling sauce which is made by pressing layers of fish and sauce together. The sauce is eaten with rice, meat, chicken, fresh fish or vegetables. Fish sauce is the traditional and indispensable food of every family at every meal. Every member of the family dips food in the same fish bowl as their common point of harmony. This nice habit has been transferred from generation to generation to ultimately become a national tradition and also a symbol of the Vietnamese collective spirit: they live together or they sink together.<sup>67</sup>

In fact, the collective spirit has been one of the powerful weapons which help the people to face many invasions in their long history. In spite of strong cultural influence from over one thousand years of the

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<sup>67</sup> Vinh Kim Pham, 104.

Chinese domination, they have succeeded in preserving their strong sense of national identity.

### Cultural Characteristics

#### Rural Culture

The great majority of the Vietnamese people are born and raised in rural villages and follow village customs. In social terms, a village is a well-organized community and a basic administrative unit. It is also a cultural and economic entity with its own traditional values.

A special feature of the countryside is that every village is surrounded by a green hedge of bamboo grown in very thick clusters to form a real rampart. Bamboo is a plant typical of Vietnam with a thin and hollow stem which is very strong but flexible and as such is very useful to farmers. In the countryside, houses, furniture, and farming tools are made mostly of bamboo. Bamboo is very much prized by the Vietnamese. It is common to see a cluster of bamboo in the front of a farmer's house. For a long time in Vietnam, bamboo has symbolized the guan tu (the chun-tze, upright person), because of its characteristics. Masao Takenaka describes,

Bamboo grove - a clean wind comes and goes  
Bamboo leaves eternally green  
Bamboo roots continuously stretching in solidarity  
The Bamboo center shows emptiness.<sup>68</sup>

Not only is a hedge of green bamboo a common feature in

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<sup>68</sup> Masao Takenaka, God Is Rice (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), 83.

the countryside, but also a pagoda and a temple. All Vietnamese people have been familiar with the image of a pagoda with stupa where Buddha is worshipped. Pagodas are often built in quiet places such as on the top of a hill or on a large piece of ground with old trees, looking on to a lake. Many pagodas have become national historical vestiges.

The Vietnamese proverb, "Dat Vua, Chua lang, canh But" (Land belongs to the Kings, pagodas to the village, and sceneries to Buddha) reflects a consciousness of the closeness between a pagoda with the spiritual life of countryside people.<sup>69</sup> Many pagodas relate to a great deal of legends and myths.

In Vietnam, the dinh (temple) plays an important role for the villagers. It is the village communal house. Unlike a pagoda, a temple is built at the gate or in the center of the village. It is a large and tall house with big pillars and a spacious yard that can accommodate a large gathering of villagers. The temple is a place to worship village ancestors or national heroes and talented virtuous persons who have sacrificed for the village or motherland. On ceremonial days, rites are performed in a traditional way in the temple. In many respects, the temple can be regarded as the village cultural house.

The proverb, "Phep vua thua le lang" (The law of the

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<sup>69</sup> Vo, xvii.

king gives place to the custom of the village) shows the importance of village traditions.

### Rice Culture

Vietnam is a rice growing agricultural country. Rice is the staple food of the Vietnamese. Beside cooked or steamed rice as the main food, Vietnam has many good alcoholic beverages distilled from rice. Lua Moi (New Rice) liquor distilled from glutinous rice is well-known for its flavor. During the days of the Lunar New Year Festival, wedding festivities, and other joyful events, the Vietnamese on the highlands have the tradition of drinking rice alcohol from big vases through hollow bamboo stems. Everyone, men and women, old and young, sit around big vases of rice alcohol. Instead of drinking from glasses or bowls, they suck it through flexible hollow bamboo stems immersed in alcohol in the vase. Hence the name Ruou Can (stem alcohol) which may mean both the alcohol itself and the way of drinking it. In the drinking party, the oldest person or the distinguished guest is often invited to drink first. The master of ceremonies turns a stem to him and the rest shout "halloo" in unison as an expression of approval. The sucker takes the stem with his right hand while his left hand is placed on the knee and his look is directed at the vase. While enjoying the drink the participants sit close together, singing, chatting, or exchanging best wishes.

From ancient times, the rice philosophy of the

Vietnamese people has been shown in the legend of "Banh Day Banh Chung" (The Rice Cakes).

The sixth King Hung had twenty children. The day came when the old sovereign wished to unload the affairs of State onto his successor. But who should it be among so many heirs? A genie gave him an inspiration with a stratagem. He told his sons to come and said to them:

"Go everywhere in the world and during the course of this journey look for the strangest and most savoury dishes. You will bring me the recipe. The one among you who discovers the best will mount the throne. And the princes set off with a greater or lesser retinue according to their age and rank.

But the King's motherless sixteenth son, Prince Lieu, had neither servants nor counselors. He said sadly while looking at his brothers moving off: "How can I obey the King my father?"

One evening he felt discouraged and dozed off; a Spirit visited him in a dream:

"I know your loneliness and your youthful worries, I will help you. Nothing is more precious than rice, man's principal food. Therefore take sticky rice, clean it in clear water and steam it. Finally make it into two loaves: One you will make round like heaven to thank it for its help: the other square as everyone knows the shape of the earth. Inside put mung beans ground with the mortar, lard and minced meat with green onions. Then you will wrap up the whole in banana leaves, and you will stew it for a day and a night. Believe my words! With these words the Genie disappeared.

On walking, Lang Lieu went to find his old nurse whom he let into the secret.

After a long time of careful attempts he managed to cook the cakes to perfection. He was calm and kept the secret as the Genie had advised him. When the long awaited day arrived, on their return from long journeys his brothers placed the rarest food on the trays: exotic fruits, unknown fish from faraway seas, spices, condiments with strange and penetrating perfumes.

The old King tasted everything, taking the opinion of his attendants who marvelled at so much diversity. However, it was the sticky rice bread of the sixteenth son which won the King's vote. He not only approved of their symbolic shape but, with far seeing intelligence he thought the other food would be very difficult to procure, although valuable for its curiosity. Which was not the cases with that presented by Lang Lieu. When asked the latter told them about his anxiety and



the appearance of the Genie.

Struck by this revelation, the King estimated that this Heavenly intervention could only help the prince in the conduct of State. Then, having repeated the recipe, he instructed his Ministers to reveal it to the people of Vietnam. He decreed that the round cake would be called "Banh day", and the square cake "Banh chung."

Then the King handed over the throne to Lang Lieu.<sup>70</sup>

As a tradition during the Tet festivals, the Vietnamese people always make these rice cakes and put them on the family altars. This is the way they express their gratitude to heaven and earth which feed them with rice. These offerings are not only the purest, but also the most meaningful because they are made of nothing except rice which was the basic foodstuff of the people. The Vietnamese popular saying "hat com la hat ngoc troi cho" (each grain of rice is a God-given pearl) expresses the great value of rice. For the Vietnamese people, rice is life.

Rice growing is hard work. When the rainy season comes, all in the family gets busy planting the rice seedling. All members of the family have to work to ensure their survival.

Cai ngu may ngu cho lau  
Me may di cay dong sau chua ve  
(O baby, sleep well and sleep long,  
For your mother has yet to be back from the field]

The quality and quantity of the crop depend on the

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<sup>70</sup> Huu-Ngoc and Francoise Correze, Anthology of Vietnamese Popular Literature, trans. Peggie Preston et al. (Hanoi: Red River Publishing House, 1984), 111-13. See also Mien Trong Hoang, Viet Nam Van Hoc Toan Thu [Anthology of the Vietnamese literature] (Saigon: Quoc Hoa, 1986), 76.

weather; therefore, the farmers are not at ease until the harvest comes.

Trong troi trong dat trong may  
 Trong mua trong gio trong ngay trong dem  
 Trong cho chan cung da men  
 Troi yen bien lang moi yen tam long  
 [Watching the sky and earth and cloud  
 Watching the rains and winds, the days and nights  
 We wish our feet to be hard, stones to be soft  
 We wish the sky to be still and the sea to be calm  
 And only then will we be at ease].

The relationship between the peasant and buffalo is a very close, intimate, and friendly one. During the rainy season, when the field is flooded and swamped and the soil becomes muddy, the farmers bring the buffaloes and ploughs. Under the rain, people and animals work together all day long.

Tren dong can, duoi dong sau  
 Chong cay vo cay con trau di bua  
 [In the rice fields high and low  
 The husband is ploughing, the wife transplanting  
 And the buffalo harrowing]

Whatever the hardship, their hope is always lighted up:

Trau oi ta bao trau nay  
 Trau ra ngoai ruong trau cay voi ta  
 Cay cay von nghiep nong gia  
 Ta day trau day ai ma quan cong  
 Bao gio lua tro day bong  
 Thi con ngon co ngoai dong trau an  
 [O, buffalo, let me tell you,  
 Let's go out to the field and plough with me  
 Ploughing and transplanting are the farmer's vocation  
 If we work side by side without sparing any effort  
 When the harvest time comes,  
 There will be sweet straws in the fields for you]

But in the dry season, the buffalo is on holiday. He is led to the swamps and submerses himself in the water and mud. Buffaloes love mud. Bernard Newman made a vivid and

humorous observation when he wrote,

He is said to dislike women, but the local people deny this. But he does dislike Europeans, at least, he dislikes their smell. The buffalo has a very keen sense of smell and does not like the smell of the soap which Europeans use. Since the Vietnamese like to use lots of water but very little soap when they wash, the buffalo is less sensitive to their smell.<sup>71</sup>

### Folk Culture: Festivals

Vietnamese folk culture is manifest most evidently in their festivity. Each festival is always linked with a story of the people which expresses their mentality and personality and national character. Vietnamese festivals occur annually after the lunar calendar. According to the lunar calendar, there are 12 months or 355 days in a year, 29 or 30 days in a month. Every four years there is a 13-month year (leap year) to adjust the cycle so that the beginning of each lunar calendar year always occurs in the spring season.

In addition, there is a cycle of 12 years, symbolized by animals in the following order: Ti (rat or mouse), Suu (ox or carabao), Dan (tiger), Meo (cat), Thin (Dragon), Ti (snake), Ngo (Horse), Mui (goat), Than (monkey), Dau (chicken or rooster), Tuat (dog), Hoi (pig). There are also 10 "Thien can's" in the following order: Giap, At, Binh, Dinh, Mau, Ky, Canh, Tan, Nham, Quy which come from oriental astrology. The formal name for each year is the combination of one of the 12 animal names and one of the 10 Thien Can's.

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<sup>71</sup> Newman, 48.

The following year will bear the name of the next animal and Thien Can on the lists, (e.g., Mau Than, Ky Dau, Canh Tuat, etc.). Therefore each combined name will repeat every 60 years. For example, the year of 1993 was named Qui Dau, and this name will reoccur in 2053, completing a cycle of name combination.

It is noted that there are some differences between the Chinese and Vietnamese naming convention for the animals: The Vietnamese year of Meo (Cat), the Chinese call the year of the Rabbit. This is understandable if we notice that the early Chinese led a nomadic life while the Vietnamese household kept cats to catch mice. Moreover, the Vietnamese have always been family oriented, living in villages surrounded by bamboo fencing. The Chinese refer to the year of Mui (which mean the domestic Goat) as the year of the Ram. The difference probably arose from the lifestyle explained above. Additionally, for the year of Hoi (the domestic Pig), the Chinese choose to name this year the Bear, the year of the Carabao, the year of Buffalo.

Vietnamese festivals are scheduled after the lunar calendar. Following are some of the many festivals which are celebrated annually. It is remarked that each Vietnamese festival is always accompanied with a legend to explain its origin and meaning.

The Tet. In Vietnam, the Lunar New Year Festival is called Tet. Living in an agricultural country, most

Vietnamese do their farmwork during the year so that when Tet comes they can have some rest. The festival takes place during the full moon prior to spring planting.

Tet is the occasion for people to show love for one another through wishes and gifts at the beginning of the year. Vietnamese all over the country return to their parents' home, bringing food and gifts. Young people will all gather to wish the elders a long and healthy life, to show love and respect for their ancestors, grandparents, and parents. Tet is the time to visit relatives and commemorate one's ancestors. Tet is also the time for forgiveness and reconciliation. Because everyone wants to enjoy the whole celebration, they try to be in his best mood. Everyone tries to heal old wounds and forget about conflicts which happened during the year. Tet is the time for renewal when debts are repaid, mistakes corrected, forgiveness asked, and family and ancestors remembered. Tet is a time to review the past, enjoy the present, and plan for the future.

There are many symbols associated with the holiday. One of these is the peach tree branch. Flowering branches are put in vases in Vietnamese homes. During Tet people light firecrackers to celebrate the New Year. Many people believe that the loud sounds of the firecracker could drive away evil spirits or haunted souls, hence their business will prosper in the new year. Firecrackers light up the sky each night. Red and gold papers are seen everywhere as a

decoration. It is a mixture of happiness and noise, seriousness and quiet. Everyone celebrates the holiday, no matter what his or her religious beliefs.

The first footing ritual is also a custom on the Tet. Many people believe that the first person who comes to their door step on New Year's Day is the one who could bring either good or bad luck for the whole year. Therefore, they usually ask a person thought as lucky to set the first step into the house for them. Sometimes the owner himself performs this ritual if he cannot find any other person. Each year, before the Tet, on the 23rd day of the twelfth lunar month, there is the ritual to send the Kitchen god to Heaven. The Vietnamese believe that there is a Kitchen god in every home whose function is to watch over the events in the family during the year. At the year's end, he is said to go up to Heaven to report what he observes in the family and oversees on earth. The head of the family sends him off piously with steamed sweet rice, boiled chicken, rice wine and fruits. The Kitchen god, as believed, lightly rides a carp on his celestial voyage, to report on everything that went on earth the year before to Ngoc Hoang Thuong De [the Emperor of Heaven].

The Neu (the Pole) of Tet is one of the special traditions during the Tet. On the days preceding Tet, the inhabitants of the village plant in front of their houses an extremely tall bamboo tree, which is called the "Neu." On

the top of the tree are hung bows, arrows, bells and gongs in the hope that in this way all misfortunes of the past year will be chased away, paving the way for a happy new year. The story about the Neu is told as follows:

At this time the demon possessed the whole earth. He let out plots for rent to men which his greed often made the most arbitrary.

That year the rice stalks bent their heads, heavy with grain, in the wind. The harvest promised to be good.

"All the best sheafs will belong to me!", declared the demon. "You will keep the rest."

The ears for the demon the straw for the peasants: it was destitution and famine. Man then returned towards Buddha.

"Why don't you plant potatoes?" he replied.

No sooner said than done. The harvest arrived, they carried the top of the stalk to the demon and kept the precious tubers for themselves.

The demon, hoaxed, made a new law: the feet and the heads must be given to him. The Buddha, who had more ideas than the devil, then appealed to again said simply:

"Hurry and plant your ground with maize."

It was done straight away. When the maize reached maturity as ordered they carried the roots and the hairy tops to the demon, keeping the heavy ears for themselves.

In his anger our demon snatched the ground from the men.

"How can we live now?" groaned the latter.

"Don't worry," replied the Buddha. "Beg the demon to sell you, at the full price, just a square of the earth to plant a bamboo. But be careful! With the guarantee you will be given the whole area of ground covered by the shade of this tree.

The greedy demon accepted, believing that man had been taken in one more time. But as soon as the bamboo was planted Buddha covered its top with his own robe. The bamboo grew and its shade spread out a little more each year. Never had a bamboo grown so tall, to such a height that the shadow soon covered the whole earth. The demon progressively withdrew, and had, to take refuge in the Eastern Sea. Dispossessed, he swore to avenge himself on men and to regain his riches. He sent all the beasts of prey onto the earth. Men united to resist them. But the victory remained uncertain.

"Make bows with wood from the forest, arrows with pine

apple spikes, and mix them with water, garlic, and lime. This burning liquid will make all the wild animals retreat." Thus said Buddha.

The enemy was beaten. The demon then asked the men for permission to return to earth for three days every Tet to visits the tomb of his ancestors.

Ever since then the tradition has existed in the countryside to plant a pole in the middle of the yard to frighten the demon.<sup>72</sup>

That is the reason why every year when Tet comes, Vietnamese peasants plant a Neu pole in front of their houses. The shadow of the Neu symbolizes what defined the limit of the land acquired by the people in the legend. The sound of the small bells and gongs on the Neu are a reminder of the human's right to own the land. The bows and arrows tell that they were once the weapons used to fight off the Devil. The story of the Neu reminds the people that although cruel and cunning, the Devil was defeated by the people who faced him with courage and firmness.

Mid-Autumn Festival. The Mid-Autumn Festival is also known as the Full-moon Festival, or Children's Festival. It is celebrated on the fifteenth of the eighth lunar month-- which is always a full moon night. On that night, drums sound everywhere, shaking the whole village. The lion head dances amidst firecrackers and lanterns with various shapes and colors. Moon cakes and soft cakes are consumed in great quantity.

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<sup>72</sup> Huu-Ngoc and Correze, 127-29. See also Dien Xuan Chu and Chi Que Le, Tuyen Tap Truyen Co Tich Viet Nam [A collection of Vietnamese legends] (Hanoi: Dai Hoc va Trung Hoc Chuyen Nghiep, 1987), 155-61.



The Lan dance is performed during the Mid-Autumn festival. It is not known whether it was started in Viet Nam or China. It is simply understood that Lan is one of the four mythical animals, namely, Long (dragon), Lan (Lan is an animal that has a lion's head and a horse's body with a short tail), Quy (turtle), and Phuong (phoenix). According to mythology, Lan is a kind of lion, hence the dance requires strong and swift movement. The colorful and powerful shape of the Lan attract children's interest, giving them a joyful time.

Giong Festival. This festival is a memorial of Thanh Giong (Saint Giong), also called the Celestial King of Phu Dong, a village of North Vietnam, who fought the foreign invaders to save the country.

During the dynasty of Hung Vuong there lived an old spinster. One day when she went to the rice field, she happened to walk on a large footprint and soon after, she conceived miraculously without a husband and gave a birth to a baby and named him Giong. When the boy was three years old, he lay still on his back, crying for food. He could neither turn over nor sit up. He could not speak or smile. At that time, the country was repeatedly attacked by the enemy from the North. King Hung Vuong led the defense, but he was always defeated. He sent a messenger to look all over the country for a talented fighter. Hearing the voice of the messenger, Giong suddenly talked and asked for an iron horse and a sword. Believing this was a God-sent hero, King Hung-Vuong had all the iron available in the country collected and forged it into a huge horse and the weapons which Giong had requested. The weapons were too heavy for anybody to move. The King then ordered thousands of his troops to carry them to Giong. As the royal troop approached, Giong sat up and said to his mother, "Cook rice for me, please!" She hurriedly did as he asked. He started eating until the rice in all the house was gone. His mother then asked for help from her neighbors. They brought rice. The more rice

they brought, the more he ate. He kept eating until nothing was left. The rice made him grow so fast that his clothes burst, and the villagers had to make new one for him. He stretched himself and became incredibly big and tall. Giong let out a shout like the roll of thunder, "I am a God-appointed general." He put on his armor and helmet, took the sword and jumped on the iron-horse. The horse became alive and galloped towards the enemy. The sword in his hand flashed like lightning, killing a great number of the enemy. The iron-horse spouted red flames, burning the enemy's barracks and the neighboring forest. Frightened at the sight, the enemy general ordered his troops to retreat. Giong followed them. When his sword broke, he uprooted clumps of bamboo-trees growing on both side of the road and tossed them at the fleeing troops. After restoring peace and order to the country, Giong went to the mount of Soc Son, took off his armor and helmet, and flew his horse to Heaven.<sup>73</sup>

The tale Thanh Giong (Saint Giong) fighting the foreign invaders to save the country was the first record of resistance against foreign aggression, with a semi-historical semi-legendary character.

#### Folk Literature and Art

To sing children to sleep is a wonderful custom of every Vietnamese mother. The mother is likely the first singer that the children have ever heard in their lives. Lullabies, very melodious songs sung in a soft voice, are counted among the most ancient songs in the Vietnamese folk repertory which have been passed from generation to generation and become the collective memory of the people. As the first musical experiences, these songs remain with the child for the rest of their lives. Through lullabies they have learned folk songs carrying with them moral

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<sup>73</sup> Dien Van Tran, 47-56.

messages. The Vietnamese lullabies are designed to be educational instruments:

Con oi con muon nen nguoi,  
 Lang tai nghe lay nhung loi me ru  
 (My child, to become a worthy person,  
 You must pay close attention to mother's lullaby)

Since childhood, Vietnamese people have learned proverbs, myths, legends, fables transmitted orally by their parents and grandparents. The elders possess the art of telling stories, legends, and traditions, by means of which they transmit the national customs and religiosity. Story-telling is deeply rooted in the Vietnamese culture. The stories are one of the most effective forms of transmitting the values and flavors of the culture. They are of significant educational and moral values and impact their lives strongly. Folk songs, legends, myths, proverbs, having emerged from the womb of nation, are used as guidances and principles for their daily lives. These forms of oral literature reflect the history of the people, their philosophy and way of life. Therefore to understand the Vietnamese people, it is necessary to study their cultural treasures, which are extremely abundant and precious. People always have a close relationship with the culture in which they live.

Additionally, in studying Vietnamese culture, we should not neglect the folk art of the people which has been transmitted from the beginning of Vietnamese civilization to the present time. Folk art does not reflect the views of an

individual artist but represents a collective experience. Themes and subjects in Vietnamese folk art are very simple and familiar to the peasant life such as a chicken, a pig, a toad, a boy, an old man, a peach, lotus flowers, etc. They describe activities in the countryside or images of rural festivities. Due to its simplicity, it is unnecessary to have a special knowledge to understand and appreciate Vietnamese folk art. Vinh Kim Pham contends that Vietnamese folk art is wonderful in bringing to people everywhere in the distant countryside the flavor of art, the national colors, the essence of traditional morality, the dreams and the beliefs of the people.<sup>74</sup>

According to Takenaka, traditional Oriental painting stresses the importance of listening in visual art. The Oriental approach to art emphasizes the art of listening, even in the case of visual art, which is to express the sound of the waterfall, the singing of birds, and the songs of the flower.<sup>75</sup> Besides, Oriental art combines both poetry and painting. Listening and seeing go together in Asian art. By this means, art carries with it a prophetic message and conscientizing role.<sup>76</sup> Vietnamese folk art shares all these common characteristics with other Occidental peoples. In fact, being made up of the work of

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<sup>74</sup> Vinh Kim Pham, 163-70.

<sup>75</sup> Takenaka, 30.

<sup>76</sup> Takenaka, 44.

ordinary people, Vietnamese folk art plays the role of preserving the national inheritance. The works of folk art often reveal the joy of living, humor, and common sense.

#### A Theological Reflection on Vietnamese Culture

Since ancient times, for the Vietnamese, the mother has become a symbol of the homeland. The word "Dat Me" (Mother's Land) expresses the homeland as close, intimate, and lovable for the people. Homeland is not only the territory in which the people live but also all things, seen or unseen, belonging to the people. It is the culture, in a general sense, which has attached to the lives of the people since the old times when the nation was created. The country is sweet and lovable like a mother.

Que huong la chum khe ngot  
 Cho con treo hai moi ngay  
 Que huong la dem trang to  
 Hoa cau rung trang ngoai them  
 Que huong la con dieu biec  
 Tuoi tho con tha tren dong  
 [My homeland is like a carambola  
 On which I climb everyday to pick juicy fruit....  
 My homeland is like fallen racemes of white areca  
 In the night of shining moon  
 My homeland like the kites flying high in the sky  
 My homeland is like the wings of storks....  
 .....  
 Each person has only one homeland  
 Just as she/he has only one mother]<sup>77</sup>

Those sweet poem verses, expressing the link of individuals with their homeland, have aroused deep sentiments toward the beloved homeland in the hearts of the people. Truly, for the Vietnamese, each person has only one

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<sup>77</sup> Dan Van Tran, 6-7.

homeland to love and to be proud of, just as one has only one mother.

In the Vietnamese perspective, if we are looking for a place for ourselves, or a way to live as human beings in the universe, then we simply find it in the motherland. To live is to live in a family, a community, a nation. Like family, the nation is a reality that we must accept to become mature. An individual who is really mature has matured in the womb of the motherland. It is in this place that individuals can affirm their identity.

The Vietnamese are a people who earnestly love their country. This has been evidenced by their history of struggle for the survival of the homeland. For the Vietnamese, to love the country is to love her culture and accept it as an invaluable heritage. The love for the country always appeals to everyone to remember and come back to their roots. Here, the Tet festival can be taken as an example. For the Vietnamese, Tet is an occasion for those living away from their home to return to the countryside, home village, the family, the ancestors' tombs and altars; otherwise, the Tet will lack meaning. Tet is the time for the people to come back to their origins. The image of Tet with its meaning and all activities makes the people recognize their nation as a reality, not abstract but concrete, that they can experience directly, they can see, hear, touch, and so they can love it and attach to it.

Located at the crossing of two great ancient cultures, Chinese and Indian, Vietnam, while assimilating outside influences, has always attached great importance to preserving the particular characteristics of its national culture. In other word, the Vietnamese people have shared common features of Asian culture, yet, at the same time, preserved their uniqueness of their own national character.

Ta ve ta tam ao ta  
 Du trong du duc ao nha van hon  
 [Let us go home and bathe in our own pond  
 For clear or muddy, it is still ours]

Considering the "muddy" pond as better than the "clear" one, the Vietnamese go beyond the common sense of value. In fact, the uniqueness of the cultural heritage of the people transmitted from generation to generation is often grasped and understood through intuition rather than rationality.

Under the Confucian influence, Vietnamese society was stratified into four classes of people on the basis of education and occupation, namely, si, nong, cong, and thuong (scholar, peasant, worker, and merchant). The scholar-officials along with the emperor and his family constituted the ruling class. In a predominantly agricultural country, the common people always upheld the role of peasants. This is evidenced by the popular saying, "Nhat si nhi nong, het gao chay rong nhut nong nhi si" (In normal times, scholars rank first, peasants come second, but when rice runs out, peasant first, scholars second). The attitude against the dominant class is reflected in the Doan Ngo Festival, also

called the Insect-killing Festival. This festival celebrates the death of Ch'u Yuan, a Chinese poet who preferred death to accepting the corruption at court that surrounded him. The Vietnamese thought that this was a shining example of an honest bureaucrat. By commemorating him every year, the Vietnamese remind the rulers of their nation of the need for periodical purification of its corrupt officials. The officials are compared to harmful insects that one must kill in order to save the harvest.

It was Confucian ideology that has contributed to the gender inequality in Vietnamese society for centuries. In the patriarchal family system, the relationship between husband and wife was based on the duty of one-way obedience. In general, a woman was expected to be dutiful and respectful toward her husband and his parents, to care for him and his children, and to perform household duties. There were few women in public life. Marriage was regarded primarily as a social contract and was arranged by the parents through intermediaries. The parents' choice was influenced more by considerations affecting the welfare of the lineage than by the preferences of the participants.

From the Yin Yang perspective, man and woman are one source of life, and thus woman cannot be subordinated. In other words, in the Vietnamese agrarian culture, originally, woman could be liberated from male domination more than in the nomadic culture. Of course, this philosophy has been



distorted for a long time to conform to patriarchal ideology. The original I Ching metaphysics, which implies an ontological equality of Yin and Yang, has been so disguised in Confucianism that women became subordinated by men. The eastern traditional view of Yin and Yang should be rediscovered and used as a tool for fixing the ideology of superiority of men to women. Originally the Vietnamese culture upheld the role of women. For example, in the early history of the country as recorded, Trung Trac (Vietnam's Joan of Arc) and her sister who led a revolt in response to increased Chinese domination have been admired and honored as national heroines. In Vietnamese mythology, which reflected the culture, the image of woman had been highlighted. For example, Nu Oa was considered the goddess who created heaven and earth, Au Co as the mother of the Vietnamese race, Lady Trieu as the female figure who liberated the people from foreign invasions.<sup>78</sup> Clearly, Vietnamese mythology affirmed the creative role of women. Mythology is the evidence of the thankfulness of the ancient people toward the national heroines. However, under the Confucian influences, women have been despised and excluded from social activities. The Confucian conception, which has for a long time strongly impacted Vietnamese culture, that "Nhat nam viet huu, thap nu viet vo" (one man is worthy yet

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<sup>78</sup> Hao Thi Do, Cac Nu Than Viet Nam [The Vietnamese goddesses] (Hanoi: Phu Nu, 1984), 4.

ten women are nothing) is evidence of the gender discrimination. At this point, it is the task of the Church to raise the prophetic voice for a transformation of negative cultural aspects. Such a transformation in fact is to rediscover the cultural heritage of the people which has been overshadowed by foreign ideologies. It is also returning to a biblical authenticity that has been misinterpreted by a theology influenced by the Western culture.

All the religions imported to Vietnam have usually been accepted by the people with openness, except for those contrary to their ethical viewpoint of Nhan, Nghia, Le, Tri, Tin (Benevolence, Loyalty, Politeness, Knowledge, and Trustworthiness). For most Vietnamese people, all religions are equally good. They believe that all religions make people virtuous. Therefore, the acceptance of a new religion does not necessarily imply the rejection of the old. In their minds, all religions are equally real and good, and therefore may be seen as alternative rather than mutually exclusive realities. In such a context, it is necessary to promote the spirit of dialogue between Christianity and other religions in Vietnam. This is not because of Christianity's absolutism but because of the fact that other religions may provide insights for a better understanding of Christian faith. The worship of ancestors and other invisible powers which have a close connection

with the living on earth, as believed, is to express the respect for them and put Nhan, Nghia, Le, Tri, Tin into practice.

C. S. Song has well pointed out the meaning of the ritual of rice. For Asians, rice is life, hope, and spirit. In the ritual of rice, the bowl of rice becomes a link between the living and the deceased, life and death, present and future. This is the rice of hope. Song stresses that ancestor worship is the consciousness of the living presence of the dead. It is not a ritual of death but a ritual of life which helps people remember the dead. When sharing the bowl of rice we look forward to the day when we find ourselves in the company of all those who are bound together with our family ties. In this sense, the bowl of rice has been transformed into the Lord's Supper.<sup>79</sup> What Westerners think of as superstition is simply the way the Vietnamese observe rites and courtesy. Missionaries with a Western way of thinking have often condemned the cultural expressions of the beliefs of the Vietnamese people.

Buddhism is a major religion in Vietnam. The Buddhist doctrine advises people not to participate in social activities but to enter the monkshood and follow a monastic path as a means of reaching nirvana, a world devoid of birth, death, joy, or suffering. Buddhism thus preaches release from rather than participation in daily life. No

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<sup>79</sup> Song, Third-Eye Theology, 170-71.

form of Buddhism is primarily concerned with solving socio-political problems. However there have been times in Vietnamese Buddhism's development, that, in response to concrete situations, the religion has played an active role in social affairs. Under the Le, Ly, and Tran dynasties, many Buddhist monks played active political roles. During the late nineteenth century Vietnam began losing land to the French colonists, and was eventually completely colonized. For the people, loss of country means loss of life, loss of freedom, loss of independence, and a loss of the right to form their own value system. Vietnamese Buddhists were Vietnamese first and foremost, and thus share the national agony with their countryfellows.<sup>80</sup> Certainly, the attitudes of the Vietnamese Buddhist should be an example for the Church of Vietnam, which has often stood apart from social and political concerns.

For Buddhism, human life is so full of suffering and misery that the collective tears of humanity would far surpass the amount of water in the ocean. Human misery is an unavoidable product of his natural life (birth, ageing, illness, and death). This Buddhist assumption, which is indeed similar to the Christian view point, can be used as an intermediary to communicate the Gospel to the Vietnamese people.

Festivities have always played a significant role in

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<sup>80</sup> Thu Tai Nguyen, 374-75.

the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. Having been formed by natural and social environments, festivities reflect the agricultural life, historical events, as well as other social aspects. They reflect and transmit traditions of the villagers, and also function as means for educational, enjoyment, and recreation. Village festive days, usually occurring at village common houses, temples, pagodas, reflect the collective spirit of the people. They are attractive to all ages, all classes. These are the days to express the strength of the nation. On village festive days, individuals become unknown and absorbed in the collective community.<sup>81</sup>

Tissa Weerasingha is right when he writes,

One of the reasons why Christianity continues to be considered an alien religion in Buddhist societies is the fact that Christian celebrations do not possess a local flavor. Moreover, some ceremonies which could be practiced by Christians (sometimes with minor adaptations) have been totally eliminated from their lifestyle. Thus, the Christian community appears to be incongruous with the local context and the indigenous people.

He suggests that,

In order for the Christian message to flow freely in Buddhist societies it is necessary therefore to attempt to use the art forms used at the major festivals as means of celebrating Christian festivals. Furthermore, the ceremonies and rites of passage among the local people should be "Christianized" so that there is minimal social dislocation when people come to

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<sup>81</sup> Vu Trung Le, Le Hoi Co Truyen [Traditional folk festivals] (Hanoi: Khoa Hoc Xa hoi, 1992), 8-15.

Christ.<sup>82</sup>

Because Vietnam has a rural and rice culture, Vietnamese peasants always play an important role in defending and preserving the Vietnamese culture. Seeing how the traditional Vietnamese in the countryside practice Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, one can say that "the peasants are the base of Vietnamese people, and agriculture is the base of the Vietnamese culture."<sup>83</sup>

Living in a nation of agriculture, the Vietnamese are a people who are always attached to nature. The love and admiration of nature is evidenced obviously in folk songs and myths. Many Vietnamese women bear first names which are the names of flowers, birds, plants.

The Vietnamese understands their God in their own way. One can find the Vietnamese concept of God in each of their cultural characteristics. God for the Vietnamese cannot be understood through rational wisdom. In fact, Westerners tend to be rational, while the Vietnamese tend to be intuitional and emotional. Western religion has often stressed social progress toward the Kingdom, while Eastern religion has emphasized personal growth toward the enlightenment of the individual's soul. While Western philosophy seems to be theoretic, the Eastern Way desires to

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<sup>82</sup> Tissa Weerasingha, The Cross and the Bo-Tree (Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1989), 87.

<sup>83</sup> Vinh Kim Pham, 132-33.

be in tune with nature and has emphasis on aesthetic view.

For the Vietnamese, God cannot be understood separately from the concept of humanity and earth (nature). As already mentioned above, many Vietnamese concepts concerning God and humanity as expressed in Vietnamese culture are very close to the Biblical understanding. Vietnamese morality is not far from the Christian ideal contained in the Gospel. Therefore, Vietnamese culture is also the way for the Vietnamese people to understand God. At this point, Chung Choon Kim contends,

It is unfortunate that Christian theology should not have originated from the ground of the Eastern or the Asian countries. Had it originated from the heritages of the Asian cultures, it might have been far better in understanding the original meaning of the creation and, in particular, the relationships between man and nature.<sup>84</sup>

Understanding of God is not primarily defined by the doctrines or ritualistic practices of Christianity or any religion. God is found in life experiences. Pui-lan Kwok said, "All peoples must find their own way of speaking about God and generate new symbols, concepts, and models that they find congenial for expressing their religious vision."<sup>85</sup> Therefore, our problem is that we have separated ourselves

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<sup>84</sup> Cited by C. S. Song in "Context and Revelation with One Stroke of an Asian Brush," in Lift Every Voice, eds. Susan B. Thistlethwaite and Mary P. Engel (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 73.

<sup>85</sup> Pui-lan Kwok, "Mothers and Daughters, Writers and Fighters," in Inheriting Our Mothers' Gardens, eds. Letty M. Russell et al. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 31.

from our cultural heritage in doing theology. Pui-lan Kwok continued,

We try our best to study Greek and Hebrew, and Latin or German too, if we can manage, and spare little time to learn the wisdom of our own people... We are busy solving other people's theological puzzles--and thus doing a disservice to our people and the whole church by not integrating our own culture in our theology.<sup>86</sup>

Revelation takes place in experience as primary sources in a non-Christian community. It takes place in the midst of what people are doing today. Because cultural artifacts such as myths, festivities, folk songs, folk art are of utmost significance for the Vietnamese, they must be taken into account and used for gleaning theological data when shaping and developing a Vietnamese theology in their cultural context.

Christianity means the way of Jesus Christ. But what does Christ mean to the Vietnamese? They may seem to understand the meaning of Christ through the interpretation of the western authors, but in reality, they do not understand Christ through revealed truth but through the familiar images of their own culture. It is important to present to the Vietnamese people a Christ who is an embodiment of Love, the One who came to complete the "nhan" (Humaneness) long deeply rooted in the Vietnamese mind. It is Jesus Christ who came to the world to show compassion to the poor, the sick, and the outcast. In Jesus Christ, we

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<sup>86</sup> Kwok, 31.



see a God more existential, more earthly. For the Vietnamese, to be human means to live with Nhan. In Jesus Christ, the love of God and the nhan of human beings meet together. In other words, Jesus Christ is the encounter between the love in the Bible and the Nhan of Eastern thought. Nhan, literally, means benevolence or humaneness. It may be expressed as whatever one wants to achieve, one should also help others to achieve. In negative terms, it means that you should not do to others what you would not want others to do to you. Clearly, this is a Christian message, "Do not impose on others what you do not want yourself" (Matt. 7:14).

Nhan which means to love people is not limited to the family but includes the whole of humanity. This is also the Christian love which goes beyond all boundaries (Matt. 5:45). The Vietnamese often says, "Ben be dau la anh em" (Within the four seas, all people are brothers and sisters). Nhan embraces all virtues and signifies a plurality of human beings. This idea of universal harmony is very similar to Christian love. The more we become holistic in perspective and equal in relationship as human beings, the more we become biblically authentic. The Vietnamese concept of "nhan" reflects this moral ideal. In comparing the Christian concept of "agape" with the Confucian concept of "nhan" we can see a profound encounter. It is Jesus who came not to demolish the law of Moses but to fulfill it by

the law of love, because "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10).

The main substance of Vietnamese spirituality is ethics. The ethics of the Gospel are basically the Way, not the law. The law is to obey, the Way is to follow. Jesus Christ is the Way which is not far from us because he became incarnated in our world. The Gospel is not to demolish or replace the traditions and values of the people, on the contrary, the Gospel is to make them more sufficient. In fact, the way humanity gropes for God is the same way by which Jesus Christ came to people, and thanks to Him, our way now becomes clear and secure. Therefore, in order to build and develop a Christian ethics in Vietnam, it is necessary to critically examine Vietnamese ethics, customs, and lifestyle and make use of them. These are the bone and flesh without which the Gospel cannot become embodied in the people.

Westerners incline toward reason, the Easterners toward the heart. The Westerners emphasize the philosophy of life, the Easterners the way of life. If in His life Jesus Christ proved to be closer to the Eastern mind rather than to the Western, it is easy for us to understand Him through the Eastern way rather than through Western rational thought. For Asians, truth is to be discovered not by reason but through meditation, intuition. Jesus Christ is not an object to reason but a person to encounter. Jesus Christ is

not a concept or notion to be analyzed but the truth to be understood through intuitional experience.

To build a Vietnamese theology is an attempt to recover the image of Christ in the Eastern mind, to make it incarnated in the Vietnamese people. Jesus Christ must be seen as if He were a Vietnamese of today so that through Him the Vietnamese can live more completely with the way of Nhan, can become perfect as the heavenly God is perfect. There would not have been the incarnational mystery if Christ had not become flesh. In the same way, a Vietnamese image of Christ is impossible if it is not clothed with not only the language but also the conception of life, worldview, and religious beliefs of the people.

Certainly, it will be beneficial for communicating the Gospel in Vietnam if we have a sufficient understanding of the Vietnamese culture and appropriate it to its own use. As such, the Vietnamese people will accept the light of the Gospel more easily. Through the Asian thought, Jesus Christ can be understood more fully and expressed more effectively.

## CHAPTER 4

Toward a Theology of Christian Educational  
Ministry in Vietnam

General Ecology of Education in Vietnam

The Vietnamese people have inherited a high respect for learning. The love of learning is one of the essential factors which constitute the value system of the people.

Ngoc bat trac bat thanh khi  
Nhan bat hoc bat tri ly  
[Jade without being filed is worthless,  
Likewise, a person without being educated  
doesn't know how to live]

The learned people in Vietnam are highly honored and revered. Under Confucianism, education was essential for admission to the ruling class of scholar-officials, the mandarinates. Under French rule, even though the Vietnamese were excluded from the higher echelons of the colonial power elite, education was a requisite for employment for colonial civil service and for other high-status jobs.<sup>1</sup> However, for the Vietnamese, learning itself is seen as more valuable than wealth or material success. Rich persons who are not educated are often looked down upon, and they often feel themselves inferior to learned persons.

Although the Vietnamese have a great love for

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<sup>1</sup> Cima, 129.

knowledge, it is not more important than morality. Since childhood, the Vietnamese have been taught that "Tien hoc le, hau hoc van" (You must learn politeness and civility before you learn literature). Vietnamese education was influenced by the Chinese for almost a thousand years, and later by the French with their educational systems. The teaching method follows the "listen and repeat" format. The teacher is expected to be authoritative and directive. The teacher becomes important as a giver of facts. This model places a high value on facts and information. It is important to recognize that in Vietnam the student is primarily a passive receiver of knowledge. Young children are taught to listen but not encouraged to ask questions in class.

Before 1945, 95 percent of the population was illiterate.<sup>2</sup> Poverty was a major impediment to learning for many students. Secondary and higher education were beyond the reach of all but a small number of upper class people. Despite the shortage of teachers, textbooks, equipment, and classrooms and despite the disruptions of war in the 1960s and early 1970s, both South and North Vietnam broadened educational opportunities.<sup>3</sup> By 1978, three year after national reunification, illiteracy was mostly

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<sup>2</sup> Viet Tien et al., 187.

<sup>3</sup> Cima, 129.

liquidated throughout the country.<sup>4</sup> The school system was originally patterned after the French model, but the curriculum was revised to give more emphasis to Vietnamese history, language, and literature. After 1975, all public and private schools in the South were taken over by the state as a first step toward the integration of a unified socialist school system. The teaching of revolutionary ethics and Marxism-Leninism was added to the curriculum.<sup>5</sup>

Vietnam is one of the poorest countries in the world. The perennial shortage of money is seen as a stumbling block in education. In 1979, the State made a great effort to utilize local resources for educational development. The government assigned "people's educational councils" at the grass-roots level to undertake the task. Composed of representatives of the school, parents, local administration, and various mass organizations, these councils were designed to promote more productive relations between the school and the local community.

Education continued to be structured in a traditional manner, including preschool, vocational and professional schools, supplementary courses, and higher education. General education, however, was extended from ten to twelve years. The first nine years of general education formed the compulsory level, corresponding to primary and junior high

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<sup>4</sup> Viet Tien et al., 187.

<sup>5</sup> Cima, 129.

schools; the last three years constituted the secondary level. Graduates of secondary schools were considered to have completed training in "general culture" and to be ready for employment requiring skilled labor. They were also eligible to apply to colleges or advanced vocational and professional schools which serve to train technicians and skill workers. As part of the effort to foster "love and respect" for manual labor, students spent 15 percent of school time at the primary level and 17 percent at the secondary level in manual work.<sup>6</sup>

Supplementary education served adults who had not completed a basic and secondary general education and who needed additional training in their specialties. Open to those under forty-five, supplementary courses were offered through correspondence, at worksites, or at special schools. It was expected that participants in these courses could raise their "cultural level" to the equivalent of students who had completed the ninth or twelfth grades. The number of students in institutions of higher learning increased rapidly from about 50,000 in 1964 to 150,000 in 1980.<sup>7</sup>

Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City served as the two major centers for universities and colleges; major provincial capitals were the sites of regional colleges. Vietnam now has 93 universities, colleges and junior colleges [cao

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<sup>6</sup> Cima, 130.

<sup>7</sup> Cima, 131.

dang]. Of the 150,000 college students, approximately 23 percent are female.<sup>8</sup>

Some Vietnamese observers believe that the college system needs reform to make it more diverse and flexible. Students are perceived as spending too much time trying to earn diplomas and not enough time in practical, creative activities. Many also observe that instruction in general is still oriented toward purely academic subjects and theory divorced from practical application. The shortcomings are symptomatic of a very low financial and human resource investment in education that is derived from the failure to recognize the importance of "the human factor" and the fundamental role of education in socio-economic development.<sup>9</sup>

#### A Theology of Christian Education

As previously mentioned, Christian education includes all of the ways and activities which help people come to know God more fully, fashioning people to become more Christ-like and more fully human. As such, Christian education is not only the transmission of the Christian message but also the endeavor of stimulating people to respond to a Christian ideal of service through their Christian lives.

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<sup>8</sup> Viet Tien et al., 187.

<sup>9</sup> Cima, 132.



### Understanding of God and Christian Education

Christian education can be considered as communicating and understanding God in life. In this sense, a theology of Christian education leads us to the central issues of theology relating to beliefs about God, the nature of life, and the human relationship to God and life. In other words, a theology of Christian education may begin with a statement of the doctrine of God. However, the God we learn about cannot be objectified. God is not an object among other objects, a person alongside other persons. At this point we can agree with Paul Tillich that it is to seek the "God above God," the God above the man-made God of traditional theism.<sup>10</sup> Symbols have an indispensable part to play in our knowing, providing the way in which we can attain insight into and talk about God. However, God is to be understood beyond the symbolic language concerning God.

The Eastern story of the three blind men touching a elephant reflects the human limitation in grasping reality. The first man says that the elephant is like a wall when he is feeling the side. The second says it is a rope when he is holding the trunk. The third says it is like a trunk when he encircling the elephant's leg.<sup>11</sup> From the Eastern perspective, reality can only be described unilaterally

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<sup>10</sup> See Paul Tillich, The Courage To Be (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 15, 182, 186-90.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Clasper, Eastern Paths and the Christian Way (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1980), 21.

according to the way one encounters with it. Human reason cannot reach a complete understanding of God. The famous saying of Lao Tse, "the Tao that can be expressed is not the Absolute Tao; the Name that can be named is not the Absolute name," has become common in the Vietnamese thought. The ultimate reality is nameless, indescribable, beyond telling.

All descriptions of the boundless Life are right, as far as they go. But they are limited to such a small grasp. Even the combination of all descriptions would be far short of the many-sided, richly living reality of the Life-Giver.<sup>12</sup>

In the Bible, the fact that God said to Moses, "I Am Who I Am" (Exod. 3:14) reflects the same idea about God. God cannot be expressed fully in human language. However, God is the God of human experience. God is described not only as holy and transcendent but as the God who is concerned with God's creatures and ready to associate with them. The theme of God's presence among people runs from the Old Testament through the New Testament. The anthropomorphic language in the Bible reflects the nearness of God to human beings. Both divine characteristics, transcendence and immanence, are seen as paradoxical complementarities.

Christian education begins with our awareness of a God who is present among people. Communicating and understanding God in life means to be aware of the presence of God. We do not only learn about the God "in heaven" but

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<sup>12</sup> Clasper, 21.

about the God who dwells in each of us and among us. The presence of God is realized in each of the creatures. This is evidently acknowledged by the Vietnamese people. God is the God of the whole universe but also the God of the bowl of rice the people eat, God of the cup of water the people drink every day. God is the God of the immense space but also the God of their small country. God is very distant from the people but also very close to them. God is the God they cannot understand; yet also the God they experience everyday. It is in cau Troi (prayer to God) that the Vietnamese become conscious of the divine God, and that they experience personally the transcendent divine reality as personal God.

The story of the prodigal son in Luke 15 sets forth God as generous, forgiving, and loving. This is a picture of the grace of God. God is the Father not of a few people but of all the world. The use of Father for God is not to be restricted simply to the Christians. The image of God in this biblical story is really close to the Vietnamese. On the one hand, when we refer to the divine-human relationship as analogous to that of parent and child, we reflect our view that there is a legitimate dialogue and interaction between God and human beings, rather than mere divine determinism. This is also true in the Vietnamese concept of Troi (God) which is filled in oral folk literature. The popular saying, "Co Troi ma cung co ta" (Everything is not

only dependent on God but also on human being) reflects the interactive relationship between God and humanity. This is the God of creative-responsive love of which John Cobb and David Griffin speak. This God (or Troi in Vietnamese concept) is seen as the divine creative activity as based upon responsiveness to the world. God does not wholly control the world. Divine creative influence must be persuasive, not coercive. With divine love, God does not seek to control his creatures, nor seek to pressure them. The power of God is persuasive, not controlling.<sup>13</sup> From this point of view, as humans, we can engage and argue with God. This Vietnamese folk concept is different from the Confucian concept of Thien Menh (The Mandate of Heaven) which is also popular in Vietnamese belief.

Paul Tillich insists that the person-to-person relationship between God and human is constitutive of religious experience.<sup>14</sup> In such a relationship, we can open ourselves to the divine. Although opening ourselves to the divine is necessary, it is an act of freedom. In our opening to God, the transcendent divine becomes a "personal God" and a partner in the process of understanding. The divine presence is conceived of as a personal God with whom

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<sup>13</sup> See John B. Cobb, Jr. and David R. Griffin, Process Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 41-62.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Tillich, Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1955), 80.

we can communicate. God is personal because God is involved in personal relationships which are parts of God's creative activity. The fact that the Vietnamese people often address God as "Ong Troi" (Mr. Troi) proves that they believe God is personal. God is personal not because God is person but because we are persons. This also reflects the reconciliation between God and human beings. The communication with God which reflects the reconciliation is to conform our intentionality with God's intentionality, and thereby we can be transformed into God's likeness.

#### Relationship Between Theology and

#### Christian Education

In his book The Shape of Religious Instruction, James Michael Lee insists that theology is irrelevant to education. For him, to be a good teacher doesn't depend on theology. He describes the role of Christian religious education as a "messenger boy" to deliver the reflections and teaching of the scholars and magisterium.<sup>15</sup> As such, for Lee, theology and Christian education are separated from each other.

However, if we recognize the connection between our understanding of God and Christian education, and consider Christian education as communicating and understanding God in life, then theology and Christian education cannot be

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<sup>15</sup> See James Michael Lee, The Shape of Religious Instruction (Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum, 1971), chap. 8.

separated from each other. All knowledge is dependent upon education and educating is dependent upon our knowledge.

Therefore theology and education are dependent on each other. Randolph Crump Miller has well pointed out that:

Theology is the determining factor in the development of the philosophy of education, of the techniques to be used, of the goals to be attained, and of the nature of the learners to be taught.<sup>16</sup>

Christian education is the means to articulate theology, which arises from existential situations. Both theology and Christian education must be rooted in human existence and deal with human issues in relation to God, to humanity, and nature. At this point, Donald Oliver and Kathleen Gershman correctly affirm that education is existentially oriented, aimed not at transcending culture, but toward apprehending the fullness of immediacy.<sup>17</sup> Thomas Groome with his perspective of a shared praxis approach affirms the relation between theology and Christian religious education. He writes, "The relationship between theology and Christian religious education must be a two-way street, one that holds theoria and praxis in a dialectical unity."<sup>18</sup> According to Groome, while Christian religious

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<sup>16</sup> Randolph Crump Miller, Education for Christian Living, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Donald W. Oliver, with Kathleen Waldron Gershman, Education, Modernity, and Fractured Meaning (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 229.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Groom, Christian Religious Education (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1980), 228.

education must be informed by reliable theological scholarship, scholars must also be informed by the lived faith of a Christian community. He continues, "Only in this way can the Christian community reunite theoria and praxis in a dialectical unity in which theoria both informs praxis and arises from praxis."<sup>19</sup> At this point, Richard P. Brien also correctly writes,

Good theology is essential to good religious education, and good educational theology and practice are essential to the learning and communication of good theology. Consequently, there is no other acceptable relationship between religious education and theology except a relationship of mutual respect and collaboration.<sup>20</sup>

In the Vietnamese context, good theology is the theology arising from the womb of their country, drawing on the resources of Vietnamese thought and experience. Theology is the people's articulation in their cultural, social, and historical contexts. To communicate such a theology must be the role a good Christian education plays. This is obvious in Vietnamese culture in which teachers are always seen as "mo pham" (model, example, pattern) for everyone. Their life must reflect what they teach. Their knowing, teaching, living are simply different manifestations of such an exemplary life. Spirituality and education go hand in hand.

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<sup>19</sup> Groome, 229

<sup>20</sup> Richard P. Brien, Basic Questions for Christian Educators (Winona, Minn.: St. Mary's College Press, 1977), 31-32.

### Functions of Christian Education

Reconciliation is the highest providential activity of God. John Macquarrie says,

Reconciliation is the activity whereby the disorders of existence are healed, its imbalances redressed, its alienation bridged over.... Reconciliation is the bringing of creation to its perfection.<sup>21</sup>

Christian education is to cooperate with God in such a reconciliation. In other words, Christian education is the ministry of reconciliation that God entrusts to the Church.

In general, Christian education functions as transformation, individually and socially. Christian education is important not only to personal life but also to community life, because it transforms community into communion. It is an act of care both for the self and for others whereby we build up and nurture our life together. We learn about the God who is acting. God continues God's creation. God is present as the power of the Holy Spirit in the midst of God's world. The relationship of God and humanity applies to people individually and collectively.

Christian education always has an eschatological meaning. Education, which implies expectation and hope, is seeking for the harmony with God and all of God's creation. Thomas Groome suggests that the purpose of Christian religious education is "to lead people out to the kingdom of God." He offers three arguments to support his suggestion.

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<sup>21</sup> John Macquarrie, Principles of Christian Theology, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1977), 268.



First, in the Hebrew scriptures, the Kingdom is God's own vision and intention for all people and creation; second, Jesus lived his life and preached for the Kingdom of God; and third, the Kingdom of God is the central theme of the gospels. He contends that, "Christian living must be in response to that Kingdom. Christian religious education has the purpose of promoting such a response."<sup>22</sup>

In fact, education is the means by which God acts through human freedom in the present to transform the human world, personal and social existence, toward the Kingdom of God. As Moltmann contends, the Church seeks to act in the direction of the Kingdom of God, transforming and being transformed. For Jurgen Moltmann, God is understood as the future but as it is revealed in the moment of promise and in relation to the human experience of the world at the given time. God's covenant with humanity is to call human beings to move in the direction of God's promise. This event of promise of God's does not separate people from the world but involves them in hope, mission, and self-emptying.<sup>23</sup>

The Kingdom of God is manifest when human intentionality is drawn into harmony with divine intentionality. To seek for the Kingdom of God is to seek for a symphony of harmony and unity in diversity. This reminds Christian educators of the concerns for justice,

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<sup>22</sup> Groome, 36-37.

<sup>23</sup> See Moltmann, 89-120.

peace, equality, and liberation. All kinds of injustice--racism, separation and lack of freedom--are to be radically challenged when we come to know God who is the God of justice. Christian education is to struggle for equality rather than discrimination. The God we cannot see is present in our thirst for justice. The quest for the Kingdom of God requires us to choose the light rather than the darkness, the oppressed rather than the oppressor. As such, a theology of Christian education must be contextual and deal with concrete situations. Being aware of the immanence of the Kingdom of God in the historical process, Christian education has to embrace all dimensions of historical existence. The loving God through the Spirit continues to transform creation into the Kingdom of God. Christian education is to co-operate with God in such transformation.

If Christian education is a journey to seek for the Kingdom of God, it is never an escape from the concerns of this life to contemplate the things "above." The end of the Christian life is not withdrawal but involvement, not isolation but communion, not inwardness but active love. The ideal of Christian service is not monastic withdrawal but involvement in all the tragedies and problems and demands of the human situation. It is the following of Jesus in a concrete situation. The basic worshipping of God is not reflection but the manifestation of love and justice.

Christian education is a form of love and care and the concern for justice.

A person is a unity of body and soul and the educational task is to concern the whole person. Christian education includes all of life. Christian service is not only the service of liturgy or ritual. It is the following of Jesus in a concrete situation. In this sense, Christian education is liberative.

#### The Church as Educational Ministry

Maria Harris in Fashion Me a People identifies five forms which shape and educate people in the Church, namely, community (koinonia), worship (leiturgia), teaching (didache), proclamation (kerygma), and service (diakonia).

Community is a governing, convicting reality. The basic forms of Christian Community are the local parish and the family. For the parish, the tasks are inclusion, leadership, and outreach. For the family, they are presence, receptivity, and responsibility.

Worship is a component of the curriculum of educational ministry. Worship includes Adoration, Contrition, Thanksgiving, Supplication. All activities of worship fall into two major categories: personal and corporate worship.

Teaching includes direction, instruction, information, and guidance on the road. Aiming at transmitting a body of authoritative knowledge, teaching is a priestly, prophetic, and political act.

Proclamation is the voice of justice because any word spoken by God is the word of a God of justice. Forms of proclamation includes Scriptures, theology, and preaching.

Service includes activities of the community such as serving at table, providing hospitality to guests, supplying the necessities of others. Forms of service include social care, social ritual, social empowerment, social legislation.<sup>24</sup>

As such, Harris affirms that curriculum is not, in any of its most important senses, reducible to resource materials, no matter how good and how useful. Curriculum is more than material and technique; it is offered through more forms of education than what is called schooling. Curriculum is an active practice of a people.<sup>25</sup> In other words, Harris sees "all the facets of the Church's life as the church curriculum."<sup>26</sup> For Harris, curriculum is the practice of fashioning a people, in response to and in cooperation with the fashioning of people that God is carrying out. It is an exciting process embracing the entire course of the church's life.

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<sup>24</sup> See Maria Harris, Fashion Me a People (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 75-144.

<sup>25</sup> Harris, 8, 17-18.

<sup>26</sup> Harris, 18.

Christian Education as Viewed from  
a Holistic Perspective

In the world of interrelatedness and interdependence, Christian education is not only concerned about humanity but also about God and all of God's creatures. Christian faith needs to transcend humanocentric perspectives to embrace all of God's creation, including the biosphere. The environment is none other than a living habitat for living things. The interrelationship and interdependency of God and human beings and all God's creation is the ground for our learning.

Therefore, Christian education is also oriented to the problems of an interdependent world. Our creational education attuned to the God of Life may save our broken world. As such, education becomes co-creational with God in the task of building the earth. The world order is a human order. It is an order in which I must learn to bring my life into communion with the earth processes of which I am an interdependent part. There is no more distinction between spirit and matter, between body and soul, between human and nonhuman. God is in relationship with the whole of life not just human life. A spiritual life has to do with all aspects of the person in relation to society, and to nature. As such, as educators, we become defenders of all of God's creation.

Christians should have a global understanding of

salvation that has to do with all aspects of the person in relation to society and to nature. God's calling to the church is a holistic calling. In the broken world, the church today must be a protagonist of the Kingdom of God. Joseph C. Hough and John Cobb have correctly affirmed that "The envisionment of goals for the church, however local and concrete, requires sensitivity to the global context. It requires also that this context be viewed in an appropriate way."<sup>27</sup>

#### An Approach to Christian Education in Vietnam

To be sure, theology, which is concerned with the God and human relationship, plays an important role in Christian education. Miller states, "Theology is the determining factor in the development of the philosophy of education, of the techniques to be used, of the goals to be attained, and of the nature of the learners to be taught."<sup>28</sup> Miller also contends that "theology must at all times be relevant to the human situation so that we can discover God at work in history and in our own generation, especially in our daily relationship."<sup>29</sup>

For many, theology as wisdom has segregated the

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<sup>27</sup> Joseph C. Hough, Jr. and John B. Cobb, Jr., Christian Identity and Theological Education (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985), 81.

<sup>28</sup> Miller, Education for Christian Living, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Randolph Crump Miller, Biblical Theology and Christian Education (New York: Scribners, 1956), 5.

community. Clergy study and laity do the work. Theology has seemed to be given to the professional clergy. This may be true with the theology which is alienated from the existential life of people, which is not relevant to their concrete situation. Theology must be linked with life. It is not what people think or talk about but what they experience and actualize in life. It is not a doctrine, an ivory tower, or a fortress but "the Way" in the Vietnamese concept. At this point, it is the task of Christian education to bring theology to people in their every life lives. Theology is no more distant, strange for them; contrarily, it is "the word of life that people can hear with their ears, see with their eyes, look upon and touch with their hands."<sup>30</sup>

#### Contextualization in the Culture

To be a person means to live in a particular historical situation, to live in a certain locality. No one can underestimate, ignore and reject the true, honorable characteristics of their own community.

Christian education must be contextualized. Doing Christian education in Asia, it is necessary to be aware of historical, cultural and religious distances between the West and the East in order to be able to make the Gospel palatable for the indigenous people. As Koyama observes, the Gospel in the Western perspective is something strange

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<sup>30</sup> 1 John 1:1.

and unrealistic to the ears of the Asian people. The Christian message in the Western forms often invites cultural resistance, psychological antipathy, and emotional reactions.<sup>31</sup>

As such, the role of Christian education is simply to inform the Asian spirituality shaped by Asian cultures and religions of the love and compassion of God in Christ. At this point, it is necessary for Asian educators to concern themselves with what C. S. Song calls the "theology of transposition," that is a Christian theology transposed from its Western context to the Asian context.<sup>32</sup> An Asian Christian theology must be relevant to the peoples of Asia. If the Christian message is to be understood according to the views of different times and backgrounds, there must be a Asian theology in general and a Vietnamese theology in particular. We cannot do theology without taking the context into consideration. A theology is relevant when it takes seriously the historical and cultural context in which one lives and works. Doing theology is to be within a real situation. Most of the countries in Asia have a colonial experience and they want to achieve authentic self-identity and cultural integrity in the context of the modern world. There is still poverty and oppression in Asia. In such contexts, Asian theology is to be a response to their

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<sup>31</sup> See Koyama, Waterbuffalo Theology, 81.

<sup>32</sup> See Song, The Compassionate God, xiii.



struggles for full humanity. In this sense, theology is to be liberational.

In Vietnam, theology is contextualized when it speaks in and through the historical and cultural context so that one can bring the presence of God closer to the people. Christian truth becomes embodied and translated in their concrete historical situation. In this sense, contextualization involves dynamic interaction of the Biblical text and the historical context. Christian education together with theology at its foundation aims at interpreting, challenging, and transforming a particular situation to make the people more fully human. If doing theology in an Asian context is to seek for ways of recovery of their cultural heritage and search for full humanity, then the role of Christian education is to uphold, articulate such a theology and put it into practice.

Christian education is to help the Vietnamese understand the Gospel with spirituality and religiosity. Contextual Christian education takes place when, on the one hand, it makes the Gospel understood in terms of the needs of the people, on religious, social, economic and political levels of culture; on the other hand, it makes the Gospel penetrating and transforming every level of culture.

Certainly, the Gospel in Asia needs to be indigenized with a distinctly Asian cultural identity. A proper understanding of God's Word as it relates to our socio-

cultural context is imperative. However, it is important to remember that contextualization does not mean changing the nature of the Gospel to conform to other religions in Asia; it does not mean setting aside the long tradition of useful theological activity in the West. Rather, it involves making use of Asian cultural categories to present the gospel meaningfully and understandably to the Asians. In doing theology in Asia, we have to deal with the issues which confront the Asians with their long history of pain, suffering, and hope. The Christian mission is participation in a historical situation, in every moment of human existence. In other words, "theology must at all times be relevant to the human situation so that we can discover God at work in history and in our own generation, especially in our daily relationship."<sup>33</sup> Contextual Christian education must carry out its task in such a theological framework.

#### Integration with the Culture

The task of Christian education is not only to teach the practices of the church but to find ways to recreate the practice so it will have meaning for their lives. To do so, it is important to make use of the language of culture, not the language of the church, in transmitting the Gospel's message. We need to make use of folktale, mythology, legends, symbols, images, and stories of the people as the most authentic resources to bring the people back to the

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<sup>33</sup> Miller, Biblical Theology and Christian Education, 5.

heart of the Christian faith. In other word, the people's cultural concepts should be used to interpret the Christian message so that it may become integrated into our appreciation of people with whom we come in contact everyday. Educators must become part of the people if they want to present the message effectively. It is necessary to be concerned about and serve concrete persons rather than a set of theories or doctrines which have been shaped by the Western culture. Traditional theology which has been shaped by Western cultures tends to despise popular expressions of faith in Asian settings. A better way for the Vietnamese to understand God is to use their cultural concepts. Within the cultures of Asia, as C. S. Song states, it is important for us to consider "an Asian way to recover the message and witness of Jesus in our own cultural and historical settings, and to reconstitute the role of the Christian church in the world of Asia in which the Christians make up only three percent of the total population."<sup>34</sup>

Christ and the Gospel must be seen through Asian eyes and understood through Asian spirituality. Koyama argues that our sense of the presence of God will be distorted if we fail to see God's reality in terms of our neighbor's reality, and our sense of our neighbor's reality will be disfigured unless seen in terms of God's reality. At this point Koyama upholds his "neighborology" and challenges

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<sup>34</sup> Song, Third-Eye Theology, 2.

Western missionaries to try to communicate the message of the real Christ to the Asians as their real neighbors. Koyama advocates for his accommodational theology. For instance, using Buddhist categories or concepts such as dukka, anatta, anicca he has proved the effectiveness in helping Buddhists understand the Gospel. To observe certain common tendencies in Buddhists may help us to interact and communicate with them.<sup>35</sup> Song also points out the similarities between authentic Christianity and the religions of Asia to promote a dialogue between the Christian faith and other faiths. While comparing the Cross and the Lotus, Song contends that these two symbols point to a crucial quest of human life-deliverance. The place for the cross and the lotus to intersect and intercommunicate is with the people who suffer from poverty, oppression, sin, death which cause spiritual and physical fears.<sup>36</sup>

Customary patterns of behavior of the Vietnamese are of utmost significance to both their culture and the Gospel. They should be used as bridges to transmit the Christian message. The negative attitudes of missionaries and early converts have often made these customs into dividing chasms. The value of the ancient Vietnamese culture has been underestimated. Many harmless social customs have been condemned by missionaries or rejected by converts, and thus

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<sup>35</sup> Koyama, Waterbuffalo Theology, 89-94.

<sup>36</sup> Song, Third-Eye Theology, 33-70.

an unnecessary cleavage has been created between Christians and non-Christians.

Certainly, the Gospel in Asia needs to be indigenized with a distinctly Asian cultural identity. A proper understanding of God's Word as it relates to our socio-cultural context is imperative. In Vietnamese settings, the recovery of their cultural heritage provides a better way to make people understand God.

#### Transformation of the Culture

Accommodational theology is an attempt to incorporate concepts and customs of other religions into Christianity. Of course, this can be acceptable up to a certain point. Certainly, every culture has its negative side. The Gospel, as salt of the earth, must penetrate and transform every level of culture. Christian education is to re-shape people who are living within their culture. Transformation takes place on both individual and social levels. In a sense, Christian education needs to be engaged in the transformation of people and culture. Mary Elizabeth Moore writes,

Transformation is important, but not transcendence in the sense of moving beyond culture. The other alternative is not very promising. Encountering persons apart from their culture is an extreme of abstraction and individualism; it fosters a tendency, often unconscious, to judge others through our own cultural lenses. In this case, the encounter is superficial, partial, and misleading.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Mary Elizabeth Moore, Teaching From the Heart (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 184-85.

Paulo Freire also contends that humanization is the basic vocation. We can become creators of our culture and not merely creatures determined by it. We can have critical consciousness of our reality to the point that we act to change it. Education is never neutral. It always has political consequences. Consequences can be either to control people by integrating them into conformity with existing society or to liberate them to deal critically and creatively with their reality in order to transform it.<sup>38</sup> Transformation must begin within the Church. Of course, "Education takes place wherever persons are opened to their experience of God and the world and are transformed."<sup>39</sup>

Clearly, Vietnamese culture as well as traditional theology is patriarchal. It has ignored or caricatured women and women's experience. These lost and caricatured images of women have affected the attitudes of both the church and society toward women, and affected the roles which are considered possible for women to play in both church and society. In such a context, it is necessary for women to become equal in shaping the theological enterprise and playing roles in both the Church and society. The Church is a community of which women form a sizable part. However, over a long period of time the Church has denied

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<sup>38</sup> See Groome, 176

<sup>39</sup> Mary Elizabeth Moore, Education for Continuity and Change (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 166.

women a place. In most Vietnamese churches the person occupying the pulpit is a man. Actually all women in the church should have equal opportunity with all men to serve in that place of ministry where they feel God has called them. I believe that both female and male have been called by God to be pastors. Tradition is not easily changed. However, it is easier to change a custom or tradition when people understand why the change is necessary. The role of women ministers is crucial to the well-being of the Church in this decade. We need to make an effort to include both men and women in the leadership of our churches. Transformation comes out of an experience of oppression. It is an attempt to interpret the search for salvation as a journey toward freedom.

Actually, the Vietnamese cultural roots including folk religions have always been much more inclusive; they do not exclude the female from the social activities. This can be proved through Vietnamese folktales and folk songs. However, under the Confucian influence, the image of the women have been distorted and alienated from the original conception of the people. Therefore, in rediscovering the Vietnamese ancient cultural heritage, we will bring the Christian message back to Biblical authenticity. In other words, in some sense, transformation of the culture takes place through the coming back to the culture profoundly embedded in the womb of the nation.

With the Gospel, Christian education also engages in the task of transformation of the culture. The Church is transformed to transform the world. Joseph C. Hough and John B. Cobb said, "The church as human community, it participates in the humanizing work of God in the world which gives shape to human possibilities and hopes."<sup>40</sup>

#### Engagement and Dialogue as a Dynamic Relation

There is a legitimate dialogue and interaction between God and human beings. Because the Church is in the world and for the world, it has a dialectical relationship with the world. Mary Elizabeth Moore writes,

The Church relationship to the world has always been a dialectical one. The church stands apart from the world and yet in it. It stands over against the world and in ministry to this world, and yet the people of the church are themselves living in the world and formed by its influences.<sup>41</sup>

In the Vietnamese cultural context, it is necessary to have a dialogue between Christianity and other religions and beliefs. Dialogue implies the possibility that the participants may have something to learn from each other, and that the others may help Christians to better understand their own Christian faith. C. S. Song writes,

We must also know how God is perceived in Hinduism, Mahayana Buddhism, in Islam, in religious beliefs and practices centered on ancestor worship.... In fact the

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<sup>40</sup> Hough and Cobb, 50.

<sup>41</sup> Mary Elizabeth Moore, Education for Continuity and Change, 65.



persons who are born, live, and die in cultures shaped by these faiths are of the utmost interest to Christian theology<sup>42</sup>

C. S. Song contends that at various levels of life, the Christian faith and other faiths can intersect through "heart to heart communication" to create a new dynamic for people in Asia which leads to a fresh understanding of both Christian spirituality and Asian spirituality.<sup>43</sup>

However, in reality, many Christians usually assume that they have the truth and the others have it not; they are right and the others are wrong. They think their duty is proclaiming rather than listening. As Koyama notes, missionaries from the West working in Asia have seen mixing the Christian faith with Asian religious and cultural heritages as a serious evil, apparently unaware that the Christianity they preached has been defined by the Western way of thinking and living.<sup>44</sup> Some people may say that they have everything to teach and nothing to learn. At this point, the matter is not to discuss dogmatic questions, but to share the experience of religion itself. Through dialogue, we can articulate the universal dimension of religious experience. Thomas G. Hand observes:

In the Western spiritual traditions, especially in

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<sup>42</sup> C. S. Song, Theology From the Womb of Asia (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), 168.

<sup>43</sup> Song, Third-Eye Theology, 41-50.

<sup>44</sup> Kosuke Koyama, Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai (Mayknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984), 187.

their popular form, there is a strong tendency to conceptualize God. These concepts become dogmas and take on paramount importance.... This conceptualizing, dogmatizing tendency, although somewhat helpful, is actually dangerous and can easily create real obstacles of the experience of God.<sup>45</sup>

In fact, through dialogue with other religions and faiths, we can share the common perceptions of the human condition by which we may come to understand how God is acting in history, and thus understand the universality of Christ. For example, as David Fisher points out, "Buddhism and Christianity share a common perception of the deficient character in human existence, for both religious traditions the human condition, apart from illumination or grace, is one of bondage."<sup>46</sup>

As Joseph Hough and John Cobb say, our concern is not to deny the validity of religious experience available in other great religious ways. Rather, our concern is that the story that we know to be true is told in such a way as to indicate its great potential for helping people to recognize and understand the creative-redemptive work of God in the world. Efforts to "prove" that the Christian story is "superior" to other stories simply are not appropriate.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Thomas G. Hand in A Taste of Water: Christianity Through Taoist-Buddhist Eyes, by Chwen Jiuan Lee and Thomas G. Hand (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 12.

<sup>46</sup> David H. Fisher, "The Second Self Is a Gift: An Essay in Christian-Buddhist Dialogue," in The Cross and the Lotus, ed. G. W. Houston (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985), 210.

<sup>47</sup> Hough and Cobb, 55.

John Cobb also points out that theologians who have addressed the relation of Christianity to other religions, typified by nineteenth century German theologians, have attempted to show the superiority of Christianity, rather than its distinctiveness in relation to other religions. It is our attempt to point out the uniqueness of Christianity. For Cobb, love is perhaps the key distinctive characteristic of Christianity. Love is a matter of relationship and as such requires a distinction but not a separation between the subject and object of love.<sup>48</sup> He contends that Christian love is a love that uniquely transcends self-centeredness in a genuine concern for the other, untainted by concern for its consequences for the lover. He stresses that one peculiarity of Christian love is its independence of the merits of the one who is loved."<sup>49</sup> In this way, as Koyama contends, the interaction of the Gospel with any religion and culture produces an enrichment rather than distortion of the Gospel; "the distortion of the Gospel occurs when a culture or religion is placed in an equal position with the name of Jesus Christ."<sup>50</sup>

Christian education is a people-centered ministry, therefore it should not exclude or make light of the

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<sup>48</sup> John B. Cobb, Jr., The Structure of Christian Existence (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1990), 127.

<sup>49</sup> Cobb, Structure of Christian Existence, 135.

<sup>50</sup> Koyama, Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai, 187.

elements belonging to human beings such as personal character, sensitivity, imagination, and especially cultural characteristics. In doing educational ministry in a religiously pluralistic context needs to respect the spirit of dialogue. The educator should be a helpful guide but should never arrogantly control a group. The educator should not arrange the responses of students as she/he wishes. Christian education takes place among persons, therefore it must respect the right to express faith in one's own way. If God discloses God's self in various ways, then theology, as the way of understanding God, cannot be limited to a formula which can be uniformly applied to any situation.

Chapter 5  
A Model for Application in the Church

Continuity and Change

Existing in the world and for the world, the Church cannot dissociate itself from the world. Christianity cannot divorce from culture and the Gospel cannot break with the tradition of the people. A person necessarily belongs to a nation thus he/she necessarily belongs to a culture. No person can live apart from a culture. Therefore, as Koyama said, "No religion is 'pure' and 'intact' in itself."<sup>1</sup>

Because religion is for human beings, it cannot alleviate the culture to which they belong and in which they live. Rather, religion must integrate human culture in such a way that a religious people may not lose their cultural identity. John England correctly states,

Local theologies arrive at a particular point of history, in the dynamic interaction of Gospel, church and culture. They grow out of and serve national or regional Christian traditions and retain the marks of a unique cultural experience.<sup>2</sup>

He continues,

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<sup>1</sup> Koyama, Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai, 187.

<sup>2</sup> John England, ed., introduction to Living Theology in Asia (London: SCM Press, 1981), 3.

Theological reflection will be Asian not because of the characteristics shared with others parts of the region: far less because of the nationality or geographical location of the theologian. Rather it will be Asian, and a witness to the one Lord, in so far as it assists the unique incarnation of the Gospel in a local Asian context.<sup>3</sup>

The relationship between the Gospel and culture is that of dynamic interaction. Apart from human condition and thus from culture, religion has no reason for existence. The Gospel comes to a nation not to destroy its culture but to become incarnated in it. Observing Christianity in China, Takenaka Masao says, "In the old days, if a Chinese became a Christian, it meant the nation lost one Chinese. Christianity was considered a Western religion, and it came wrapped in Western culture."<sup>4</sup> This is also the case with Vietnamese Christians. For example, when a Vietnamese converts to Christianity, she/he is taught to cease worshipping ancestors and put down the altars. Consequently, the Christians are considered by the "nguai ngoai" (literally "outsiders," indicates the non-Christians) as persons who abandon their ancestors and thus are convicted of filial impiety. If correctly understood, the Gospel comes not to demolish the culture but accomplish it. In fact, through culture people come to know God. The Gospel comes to make people understand God more fully and then help them overcome the negative side of the culture

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<sup>3</sup> England, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Takenaka, 32.

concerning the power of evil. The Gospel with its healing power transforms the culture into perfection, and thus makes people become more fully human.

In order to understand God more fully and avoid cultural clashes, it is important to take seriously the culture as an essential resource for theology. The goal for Christian education is to help people appropriate their cultural traditions in functional ways. According to Clasper, a sensitive appreciation of the Asian religions and spiritualities may be a step toward a deeper and renewed understanding of the Christian way. He said, "In our times the journey out, the encounter with the strange but friendly guide, may be the way in which we discover the priceless treasure that resides in our own hearth."<sup>5</sup>

It is necessary to translate the Church's language which has been shaped by the Western culture into the people's language. In doing theology, the way of thinking, the way of living, and the language of the people must be taken into account so that the Gospel is no longer strange for the folk. A theology expressed in and through the culture will make God become closer and more understandable and avoid reaction. Pui-lan Kwok has well pointed out that:

The Chinese, who live in a agricultural setting instead of the pastoral environment, have imaged the divine as compassionate, nonintrusive, immanent in and continuous with nature. The images and metaphors we use to talk about God are necessarily culturally

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<sup>5</sup> Clasper, 135.

conditioned, and biblical ones are no exception.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, every culture in some way already contains a conception of ultimate reality which is reflected in the people's way of thinking and living, and language. Therefore, Kwok Pui-lan affirms, "With full confidence, we claim that our own culture and our people's aspiration are vehicles for knowing and appreciating the ultimate."<sup>7</sup>

C. S. Song in Tell Us Our Names contends that the totality of life is the raw material of theology.<sup>8</sup> He contends that fairy tales, folk stories, and legends transmitted from generation to generation among the common people have the power to illuminate many biblical stories and other theological motifs. It was common stories in the mouth of Jesus, a master storyteller, that became parables of God's kingdom and of human life.<sup>9</sup> This is true for the Vietnamese people. For example, the Vietnamese concept of Troi (Heaven) is not essentially different from the Biblical concept of God. The Vietnamese people believes Troi as the Creator, as Love, Mercy, Compassion, Justice, Caretaker. Troi is also believed as eternal, omnipresence, omniscience. The attributes of Troi are not only manifest in religious

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<sup>6</sup> See Pui-lan Kwok, 30.

<sup>7</sup> Pui-lan Kwok, 30.

<sup>8</sup> See Song, Tell Us Our Names (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Song, Tell Us Our Names, x.



language but also in the ordinary language that the Vietnamese speak every day.

Another example, the Vietnamese concept of Nhan (benevolence, love, humaneness) is not far from Christian love. This ethical concept embraces the right relationship among people. It is Nhan which shows equality among people. It also implies that one must love others as oneself. It is the law of love which transcends all boundaries to reach out to people in need. Love is the essence of both Vietnamese and Christian ethics. Every cultural norm must yield to the law of love. Leroy Rouner said,

It is not unclean to eat meat offered to idols, Paul insisted. It is not unclean to work at healing the sick or feeding the hungry on the Sabbath day, Jesus insisted. It is not unclean to baptize Gentiles who are uncircumcised, Peter finally insisted. What is unclean, they all insisted, is to fail in love for one's neighbor.<sup>10</sup>

Vietnamese folk tales, legends, and festivities are abundant and rich in meaning. They all reflect their understanding of God and human life. Certainly, theology does not belong to the scholars or professionals but to the people. Theology is the theology of people. God reveals God-self through every culture. In other words, it is in the culture that one can recognize the image of God. Jesus Christ came with the Gospel to fulfill God's revelation in culture. Through Jesus Christ, human beings understand God

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<sup>10</sup> Leroy S. Rouner, To Be at Home (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 24.

more fully and thus become more fully human.

Keeping the connectedness of the Gospel with the culture does not mean syncretism. Rather, it is a dialectical interaction between the Gospel and culture, between the sacred and the human, between Biblical spirituality and Vietnamese spirituality, between the cross and the bamboo. Koyama said, "In the Christian perspective, as long as cultural expressions are examined in the light of the Gospel and subordinated to the value of the Gospel, the influence is one of enrichment rather than syncretism."<sup>11</sup>

Pui-lan Kwok also said,

The biblical truth must be found in the actual interaction between text and context in the concrete historical situation. Asian Christians are heirs to both the Biblical story and to our own story as Asian people, and we are concerned to bring the two in dialogue with one another.<sup>12</sup>

While the Gospel keeps its connectedness with the culture in which it incarnates, it must seek to transform and enrich the culture. As Mary Elizabeth Moore noted, change is to make something different. It is a deviation from normative patterns of belief.<sup>13</sup> Change happens on two levels: church structure and the culture of society. On the one hand, continuity with the culture leads to the change in the Church. This is necessary for coming back to the

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<sup>11</sup> Koyama, Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai, 187.

<sup>12</sup> Pui-lan Kwok, 274-75.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Elizabeth Moore, Education for Continuity and Change, 22.

cultural heritage. On the other hand, the coming back to Biblical authenticity requires a transformation of the culture.

In The Compassionate God, Song invites Christians to look beyond the particularities of their Western culture to the cultures of other peoples. He says,

I have learned that theology must be transpositional theology of transposition. It is an effort to respond to that mysterious and powerful bond of love with which the compassionate God creates, redeems, and re-creates a family and a human community.<sup>14</sup>

For Song, the theology of transposition is to meet this God not only in Israel, not only in those Western nations nurtured in Christian culture, but also in Latin American, Africa, and Asia. It is a theology that wrestles with cultural, historical, and socio-political realities in Asia. God is a transpositional God, because the God who caused the temple veil to tear in two is the God who is open to all, even to pagans and gentiles."<sup>15</sup>

A Vietnamese who becomes a Christian still continues to be a Vietnamese living in their culture. However, the negative side of the Vietnamese and Western cultures needs to be transformed in the light of Biblical truths. The patriarchal, hierarchial, and sexist cultures are still prevailing in the Church and society. In such cultures, the

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<sup>14</sup> Song, The Compassionate God, xiii.

<sup>15</sup> See Song, The Compassionate God, 95, 96. Also see pp. xii, xiii, 5-12, 16-17, and 102.

Gospel must be a power of transformation. It is necessary to re-interpret the culture in line with the Gospel. For example, Mercy Amba Oduyoye describes the condition of African women which is the same as that of Vietnamese women. She criticizes the Church for always expecting wives of ministers to do no other work but assist in the ministry of their husbands. They employ two people for the salary of one. Women are being sacrificed rather than sacrificing. By this way "the Church offers up too many women on the altar of patriarchy."<sup>16</sup> Certainly, such a situation must be changed in both Africa and Vietnam. The Church must be transformed to become agents of transformation in the society. By transforming, the Church alters the destiny of itself and of the world. Emerito P. Nacpil contends that "A theology worth its salt at this time in Asia must be capable not only of illuminating the Asian realities with the light of the Gospel, but also of helping manage the changes now taking place along lines more consonant with the Gospel."<sup>17</sup>

Continuity and change is the result of the interaction of the Gospel and the culture. In terms of Christian education, continuity and change is possible and forcible, because it "must begin where person meets person, where

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<sup>16</sup> See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Be a Woman, and Africa Will Be Strong," in Inheriting Our Mothers' Gardens, 51.

<sup>17</sup> Cited by Gerald Anderson, ed., introduction to Asian Voices in Christian Theology (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1976), 4.

person faces future, where person probes past, where person confronts contemporary issues."<sup>18</sup> Continuity and change, a model for the integration of cultural and theological reflection, is the way to the fullness of life, the Kingdom of God. This is a model for religious education because "religious education is an ethical way of life that serves to transform religious platitudes into concrete social structures that are just and serve the welfare of all people."<sup>19</sup>

Transformation is the sign of life. Life is something dynamic, not static. Continuity and change is a dynamic interaction because, as Mary Elizabeth Moore put it, persons are both stable and changing; persons are internally related to God, to other persons, and to the world; persons are both acting and acted upon by God and the world around them.<sup>20</sup>

If life is dynamic, tradition is not stable. As such, one can say that not accepting the process of transformation, the tradition will be separated from life; not accepting the continuity of tradition, progress will be separated from the people. History is a journey of people in time. People only survive by accepting transformations

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Elizabeth Moore, Education for Continuity and Change, 110.

<sup>19</sup> Allen J. Moore, ed., introduction to Religious Education as Social Transformation (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1989), 7.

<sup>20</sup> See Mary Elizabeth Moore, Education for Continuity and Change, 92.

in which the out-of-date will be picked out, just like a yellow leaf with no life must fall from the tree, giving its place for renewal. The basic issue is that in transformation, people still keep their national identity. In other words, the people will never lose their character, which includes their Vietnamese cultural heritage, during the process of transformation.

The model of continuity and change can be illustrated by the Eastern conception of Yin-Yang. According to Eastern perspective, in the process of creation, the Great Principle brought forth two polarities, then the two polarities brought forth four images, then the four images brought forth eight diagrams, finally the eight diagrams brought forth creatures. The process is shown as follows:

$$\begin{array}{ll}
 1 \text{ (the Great Principle)} \times 2 = 2 \text{ (two polarities)} \\
 2 \text{ (two polarities)} \times 2 = 4 \text{ (four images)} \\
 4 \text{ (four images)} \times 2 = 8 \text{ (eight diagrams)}
 \end{array}$$

The formula expresses a geometric progression in which the number 2 stays unchanged. This reflects reality as both changeless and changing, both static and dynamic. In the process, yin and yang interact in a dialectical way to bring forth creatures. In yin there is yang and in yang there is yin. In permanence there is impermanence, in impermanence there is permanence. Continuity and change always interact dialectically in all realities.

The model can also be understood as the three moments

of the Christian mystery, namely incarnation, death, and resurrection that Marcel Dumais mentions. Marcel Dumais properly says,

One finds, in the evangelization [proclamation of the Gospel] process, the three moments of the Christian mystery: The incarnation in cultures, the confrontation with cultures, and the death of some of their elements, and the resurrection, that is, the transformation of cultures. In Jesus the three moments are part of the same movement, so much so that incarnation does not truly reach its fullness until the resurrection, after the necessary passage through death. To remove one of these three elements is to truncate the Christian mystery. The same is true of the whole mission of evangelization [proclaiming of the Gospel].<sup>21</sup>

#### Suggestions for the Church

Based on the model proposed the following suggestions are presented here with the hope that the ministry of Christian education will become effective and fruitful in the context of Vietnam.

First, it is suggested that a Christian theology be developed in a Vietnamese context. A Vietnamese theology is the one which preserves and develops the cultural and spiritual values of the nation, absorbs the best of the world culture, combats the influences of cultural imperialism in any form, and shapes a progressive culture without distorting the authentic message of the Gospel. A Vietnamese theology which promotes ideological and cultural reform needs to be appropriated to the religiously

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<sup>21</sup> See Marcel Dumais, "The Church of the Apostles: A Model of Inculturation?," in Cultural Change and Liberation in a Christian Perspective, eds. Marcel Dumais et al. (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1987), 24.

pluralistic context of Vietnam and developed from a holistic perspective.

Second, it is suggested that Vietnamese Christian educators develop a theology of educational ministry which is biblically authentic, embracing all aspects of human beings in relation to God, to others, and to nature to educate a whole gospel for the whole person. It is necessary to keep integrity with faith in a God who calls us to full and authentic humanity. A theology of educational ministry must be rooted in the Vietnamese experience and nurtured in the womb of the nation. It must be related to, and involved in, the religious, cultural, and social life of the people to whom the Gospel is proclaimed. It must carry its prophetic role to provide insight that conscientizes, leads, and facilitates people to do the ministry of reconciliation and transformation in tune with the Gospel message.

Third, in the multi-religious cultural setting, it is suggested that a center for a study of religions be established in Vietnam, offering opportunities for dialogue between Christianity and other religions. The educational challenge in dealing with religious world views is to develop materials that compare and contrast the systems. Areas of commonality can be stressed; then the unique Christian dimension can be highlighted. This is a vital educational opportunity that the church can offer. Training



the Christians to share their faith sensitively with Asians of other religions is a vital component both of educational ministry and of witness in our pluralistic environment.

Fourth, it is suggested that a method of education should be maintained which respects the spirit of dialogue. Curriculum is not simply following instructions. In creating curriculum, it is suggested that educators respect elements belonging to human beings such as personal character, sensitivity, imagination. The educator should be a helpful guide but should not arrogantly require students to respond according to the teacher's ideas or conceptions. Christian education takes place among persons, therefore it must respect the right to say "no" to the teacher, and to the church. It is important for educators to evaluate their perspectives and approaches to a Christian Education. Educational ministry must be a powerful agent in inspiring people to take real action in their Christian lives, to lead people to a strong commitment to social action and a deep caring for others.

Fifth, educational ministry in fact embraces most activities of the Church. With the purpose of nurturing, teaching, and training, it is embodied either explicitly or implicitly in almost every event in the Church. It is noted that many times, the best learning happens through events that are not specifically in educational settings. However, for many Vietnamese churches, when talking about Christian

education, one simply thinks of the Sunday School. Many churches go by the formula that Sunday School equals religious education. The whole program of Christian Education seems to focus simply on the Sunday School. For many, Christian education only means teaching and learning --in a narrow sense of the terms--the Bible. Therefore, it is suggested that every educational dimension should be understood and applied, and especially implicitly educational events should be more emphasized, so that we can do ministry effectively.

Sixth, Vietnamese people consider national festivities of utmost significance. Festivities have always been linked with the national culture and observed for thousands of years. Christians who live within their culture are suggested to observe and celebrate respectfully and solemnly these festivities, and at the same time interpret them in new ways based on the Gospel message. For example, by celebrating the Tet or the full-moon festival, we appreciate Vietnamese tradition and express the spirit of integration of the culture. In other words, as Christians, we do not eliminate or neglect the cultural traditions of the people. Celebrating festivals is the opportunity to state the value of preserving and integrating our unique cultural heritages into the Church. At the same time, when the festivals are re-interpreted and clothed with a new meaning in the light of the Gospel, the events will have remarkable educational

value.

Seventh, pilgrimage is very popular for the Vietnamese, especially for religious people. The major religions in Vietnam have a sacred mountain and many other spots where famous temples stand. These places are used as their spiritual homes where believers flock and receive their religious education, and there they may have spiritual satisfaction and rest. It is suggested that we establish such centers of pilgrimage for the Christians to provide places for retreat and Christian festivals such as Christmas, Easter.

Finally, in order to make people become open to the Gospel, it is necessary to make critical use of cultural symbols, poems, lullabies, stories, folk tales, folk songs, religious traditions of the common people as resources in Christian education. Besides a standard version of the Bible, it is necessary to have a translation which uses the ordinary popular language of the common people. It is believed if we can help the Vietnamese understand the Gospel more easily, they may then accept it. In outward things, such as forms of worship, one ought to select usages that carry a Vietnamese flavor. Vietnamese traditional music ought to have a place in Christian worship.

To sum up, it is necessary for us in sharing the Gospel to find a contemporary style in which the timeless message of the Gospel is expressed in a timely way. It means

preserving ancient traditions and also incorporating new approaches. Christian education must demonstrate the uniqueness of the gospel in its complete adaptability to all situations. Eventually, many people do not accept the Gospel not because they disagree with us, but because they do not understand the Gospel which is not expressed in their own ordinary language. Everyone is to be seen as human beings created in the image of God. Coming to people, we must know and accept what they think, how they feel, and what they do. Over and over again, the church must learn to accept the seeming unacceptable. Only participation in their actual lives help us understand them and share with them the good news of God.

The Gospel must be relevant to people in their concrete situation. In fact, many people deny the Gospel because what we are preaching is not good news for them at all. Doing theology may call for different responses in different situations; therefore it means to be sensitive to a given situation to be able to relate to people "where they are." Leonardo Boff said,

The Church is not a completely defined and established entity; it is always open to new situations and cultural encounters, and within these realities, it must incarnate and proclaim the liberating message of Jesus Christ.<sup>22</sup>

Certainly, Christian education in Vietnam must be

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<sup>22</sup> Leonardo Boff, Church, Charism and Power, trans. John W. Diercksmeier (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 147.

concerned with what is happening to the people who actually live and deals with their need, including poverty, fear, hopelessness, loneliness, disease, and discrimination. The Gospel of salvation must prove that its power can liberate them from such situations.

## CHAPTER 6

### Summary and Conclusion

#### Summary

In order to do ministry effectively in Vietnam, it is important to shape and develop a Vietnamese theology which is relevant and meaningful to the people. It is important for the Church in Vietnam to realize the dynamic nature of the relationship between the Gospel and culture. The Church needs to study the Vietnamese culture in order to develop a greater understanding and appreciation of the national character. In this way, the Church integrates the Gospel into the people and communicates it to them in their own context. The Church in light of the Gospel and by its transforming power must become an agent for changing the negative aspects of the culture which are still existing within the Church and society.

In fact, there is a close relationship between religion and culture. Therefore, Christianity cannot, and ought not, be kept separate from culture. It is proposed that inculturation of the Gospel and transformation of the culture are the fundamental concepts for a theology of culture. Every theology must be contextual.

A study of the Vietnamese culture is essential for a

Vietnamese theology. This requires a critical examination of each cultural characteristic. Religious, cultural, historical, sociological aspects of the people have to be taken seriously. Doing so, we will see how these aspects can be used as resources for theology. In other words, we can discover how the Vietnamese cultural heritage such as traditions, customs, legends, folk tales, folk songs, stories, lullabies, festivities, spiritualities, religious concepts of the people can help us better understand the Christian faith. At the same time, in this way, we become conscious of the negative side of the culture necessary to be overcome and transformed, and thus bring the culture to the authentic message of the Gospel.

Based on a study of Vietnamese culture and a theology of culture, a Vietnamese theology can be developed. It will serve as the foundation for the Christian education ministry in Vietnam, because theology and Christian education can never be separated from each other. Christian education should be viewed from a holistic perspective and implemented by an approach of contextualization, integration, transformation. Engagement and dialogue should be considered as a methodology for approaching Vietnamese theology in general and Christian education in Vietnam in particular.

The model of continuity and change as a dynamic relation can be suggested for application in the Church.

This model can be exemplified by the Eastern conception of Yin-Yang, or the three movements of the Christian mystery, namely incarnation, death, and resurrection. From this model, some practical tasks can be drawn to be hopefully carried out by the Church. It is expected that there will be a Vietnamese theology that makes the Gospel really relevant and meaningful to Vietnamese people.

### Conclusion

Actually, liberation theologies such as black theology, minjung theology, South American theology, and Third-World theology have been efforts to express their understanding of God and articulate the Christian faith through the cultural categories of a particular people. Without doubt, theology as usually defined in fact has been shaped and expressed through the Western culture and ideology, and thus is mostly irrelevant to the Eastern people. Western theology tends to create a gap between sacred and human, heaven and earth. Certainly, Western theology is simply one among various ways to understand God and express faith. There is one God, one Christ, one faith but there are many ways to express the truth.

In his life, the carpenter Jesus of Nazareth did express God and truth in the cultural categories of his time. The words spoken by Jesus however sublime became incarnated in life. It is Jesus that was the father of the people's theology. This theology was neither an abstract



nor systematic thinking, but relevant to life, far different from the teachings of the Scribes. Jesus as the Word of God became flesh and blood among the Jews. He used the language, cultural characteristics, philosophy, and religion of his people at the time to express and communicate his theological outlook.

It is necessary to let the uneducated, the workers, the peasants, the oppressed, the outcast express their understandings about God in their concrete language. To build a Vietnamese theology is not a "theological fashion" but is an important and urgent theological task for the Church of Vietnam. A man is mature when he has the ability to think and act by himself. A nation is independent when it produces to meet the needs in the life of the people. Likewise, the Church of Vietnam will not really be mature and independent unless it has a Vietnamese theology. Dependency, either spiritually or economically, is the sign of immaturity.

Of course, to build a Vietnamese theology is not an easy task. Rather, as C. S. Song said, it is a dangerous theology.<sup>1</sup> A Vietnamese theology could be seen as underqualified compared with foreign products. Consequently, many may want to continue to import foreign products rather than use local ones. Moreover, for a long time, we have been accustomed to import and use foreign

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<sup>1</sup> Song, "Context and Revelation," 74.

products and are so familiar with Western ideologies that we cannot be conscious of our dependency. We should take a risk, because "God took a dangerous journey and ventured into a dangerous theology.... Without the danger [risk] of the Word-become-flesh, there could not have been the excitement of the empty tomb."<sup>2</sup>

When the Vietnamese people build a house, they use materials locally available, such as bamboo, thatch, wood, and clay and people can recognize that it is a Vietnamese house. It is different from Western houses, even different from other Asian houses. Using the same materials, the Thai, the Koreans, the Chinese may make houses of their own styles and forms, they may decorate in accordance with their own aesthetic sense. In the same way, in building a Vietnamese theology, we use the cultural categories such as language, images, symbols, esthetics, religions of the Vietnamese people as building materials which are locally available. The data belonging to the Vietnamese cultural tradition such as folk songs, folktales, and festivities should be made used as theological resources. These resources in Vietnamese hands will become building materials for a Vietnamese theology.

Of course, with the simplest materials, we cannot build a big and tall house. A theology for the Vietnamese at the first steps is not comparable with Western theology or other

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<sup>2</sup> Song, "Context and Revelation," 74.

local theologies. At the beginning, Vietnamese theology may look like a thatched cottage. However it may be, the important point is that it is built by Vietnamese hands with Vietnamese resources.

To lay the foundation, it is necessary for every hollow place to be filled in, the high to be made low, the obstacles to be leveled. It is necessary to eliminate the spirit of relying on others and the habit of dependence on foreigners. It is necessary to get rid of every kind of complex. Materials locally available should be used appropriately. It requires a critical examination of cultural, spiritual, ethical, and religious resources and making use of them.

However, a Vietnamese theology must be a theology for today. Stephen B. Bevans paraphrases Henri Bouillard by saying that a theology that is not somehow reflective of our times, our culture, and our current concerns--and therefore contextual--is a false theology.<sup>3</sup> Therefore we cannot neglect the contemporary trends of thought such as feminist, liberation, black, and minjung theology. These trends should be considered seriously in order to enrich our own. However, as Bevans puts it, even though we can certainly learn from others, the theology of others can never be our own.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bevans, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Bevans, 3.

In short, it is necessary to develop a theology out of the stories of the Vietnamese people and find the ways in which God has been real in their lives, because, as C. S. Song said,

Theology is poetry of God in the prose of the people. It is God's hymn in the sons of men, women, and children. It is God's story in the parables and folk tales of our brothers and sisters. Theology is God's mask dance played in the mask dance of those who, in the darkness of night, long for the approach of dawn.<sup>5</sup>

Like other Asian peoples, the Vietnamese are always proud of their cultural heritage. They feel happy in their culture. Therefore, it is important to make the Gospel incarnate in the culture, and then with transforming power, the Gospel will transform the negative aspects of the culture. In this way, the Gospel will become the Good News for the people who want of Good News. In this way, the bamboo cross will become a symbol for the dynamic relation between the Gospel and the Vietnamese culture.

Stephen Kim has correctly stated,

We all recognize that our countries of the East have been blessed with a cultural and spiritual heritage of the highest order.... The Christian message will remain an idiom foreign to our cultural soil unless the Church recognizes and integrates the valid spiritual values that have informed the life of our countries through the ages.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the task of Christian education in Vietnam is to

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<sup>5</sup> Song, Theology From the Womb of Asia, 227.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Kim, "Evangelization in the Asian Context," in Mission Trends No. 2: Evangelization, eds. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), 190-91.

educate such a theology, because theology and Christian education always go hand in hand.

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